LAHOMA

JOHN
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CEDARBANKS

Gill
no 119

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LAHOMA

Bill Atkins stood erect

LAHOMA

By

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WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY

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TO
MY MOTHER
IN MEMORY OF
OUR HAPPY OKLAHOMA
DAYS

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LAHOMA

CHAPTER I

THE TOUCH OF A CHILD

"I HAVE given my word of honor — my sacred oath — not to betray what I have discovered here."

At these words from the prisoner, a shout arose in which oaths and mocking laughter mingled like the growling and snapping of hunger-maddened wolves.

"Then if I must die," Gledware cried, his voice, in its shrill excitement, dominating the ferocious insults of the ruffians, "don't kill the child — you see she is asleep — and she's so young — only five. Even if she were awake, she wouldn't know how to tell about this cabin. For God's sake, don't kill the little girl!"

Since the seizure of Gledware, the child had been lying on the rude table in the midst of a greasy pack of cards — cards that had been thrown down at the sound of his galloping horse. The table supported, also, much of the booty captured

from the wagon-train, while on the dirt floor beside it were prizes of the freebooting expedition, too large to find resting-place on the boards. Nor was this all. Mingled with stolen garments, cans and boxes of provisions, purses and bags of gold, were the Indian disguises in which the highwaymen from No-Man's Land had descended on the prairie-schooners on their tedious journey from Abilene, Kansas, toward the Southwest.

In the midst of this confusion of disguises, booty and playing-cards, surrounded by cruel and sensual faces, the child slept soundly, her lips slightly parted, her cheeks delicately flushed, her face eloquent in its appeal of helplessness, innocence and beauty. One of the band, a tall broad-shouldered man of middle-age, with an immense quantity of whiskers perhaps worn as a visible sign of inward wildness, was, despite his hardened nature, moved to remonstrance. Under cover of lurid oaths and outrageous obscenity, he advanced his opinion that "the kid" needn't be shot just because her father was a sneaking spy.

"Shut up!" roared a tremendous voice, not directly to the intercessor, or to the prisoner, but to all present. Evidently it was a voice of authority, for comparative silence followed the command.

The speaker stepped forward, thrust his fingers through his intensely red shock of hair, and continued, with one leg thrust forward:

"You know I am something of an orator, or I guess you wouldn't of made me your leader. Now, as long as I'm your leader, I'm going to lead; but, I ain't never unreasonable, and when talk is needed, I'm copious enough. I am called 'Red Kimball,' and my brother yonder, he is knowed as 'Kansas Kimball.' What else is knowed of us is this: that we wasn't never wont to turn loose a spy when once ketched. Here is a man who says he is Henry Gledware — though God knows if that's so; he comes galloping up to the door just as we are in the midst of a game. I stakes all my share of the spoils on the game, and Brick Willock is in a fair way to win it, that I admit, but in comes this here spy—"

The prisoner in a frenzied voice disclaimed any purpose of spying. That morning, he had driven the last wagon of the train, containing his invalid wife and his stepdaughter — for the child lying on the table was his wife's daughter. At the alarm that the first wagon had been attacked by Indians, he had turned about his horses and driven furiously over the prairie, he knew not whither. All that day

he had fled, seeing no one, hearing no pursuing horse-beat. At night his wife, unable, in her weak condition, to sustain the terrible jolting, had expired. Taking nothing from the wagon but his saddle, he had mounted one of the horses with the child before him, and had continued his flight, the terrific wind at his back. Unaware that the wind had changed, he had traversed horseback much of the distance traveled during the day, and at about two in the morning — that is to say, about an hour ago — seeing a light, he had ridden straight toward it, to find shelter from the storm.

The prisoner narrated all this in nervous haste, though he had already given every particular, time and again. His form as well as his voice trembled with undisguised terror, and indeed, the red and cruel eyes fastened contemptuously on him might have caused a much braver man than Gledware to shudder visibly.

"Well, pard," said the leader of the band, waiting until he had finished, "you can't never claim that you ain't been given your say, for I do admire free speech. I want to address you reasonable, and make this plain and simple, as only a man that has been alleged to be something of an orator can accomplish. My men and me has had our conference,

and it's decided that both of you has got to be shot, and immediate. The reasons is none but what a sensible man must admit, and such I take you to be. I am sorry this has happened, and so is my men, and we wish you well. It's a hard saying, pard, but whatever your intentions, a spy you have proved. For what do you find on busting open our door? Here we sit playing with our booty for stakes, and our Indian togs lying all about. You couldn't help knowing that we was the 'Indians' that gutted them wagons and put up the fight that left every man and woman dead on the field except that there last wagon you are telling us about. You might wish you didn't know the same, but once knowed, we ain't going to let you loose. As to that wagon you claim to have stole away from under our very noses—"

A skeptical laugh burst from the listeners.

Gledware eagerly declared that if he had the remotest idea in what direction it had been left, he would be glad to lead them to the spot. He could describe it and its contents —

"You see, pard," Red Kimball interposed, "you are everlasting losing sight of the point. This here is 1880, which I may say is a recent date. Time was when a fellow could live in Cimarron, and come

and go free and no questions asked — and none answered. But civilization is a-pressing us hard, and these days is not our fathers' days. We are pretty independent even yet in old Cimarron, but busybodies has got together trying to make it a regular United States territory, and they ain't going to stand for a real out-and-out band of highwaymen such as used to levy on stage-coaches and wagon-trains without exciting no more remarks than the buffaloes. You may be sorry times is changed; so am I; but if times *is* fresh, we might as well look 'em in the face. Us fellows has been operating for some years, but whatever we do is blamed on the Indians. That there is a secret that would ruin our business, if it got out. To-morrow, a gang of white men will be depredating in the Washita country to get revenge for to-day's massacre, and me and my men couldn't join in the fun with easy consciences if we knowed you was somewheres loose, to tell your story."

Again Gledware protested that he would never betray the band.

"Oh, cut this short," interposed Kansas Kimball, with an oath. "Daylight will catch us and nothing done, if we listen to that white-livered spy. We don't believe in that wagon he talks about, and as

for this kid, he brought her along just to save his bacon."

"No, as God lives!" cried Gledware. "Can't you see she is dead for sleep? She was terrified out of her wits all day, and I've ridden with her all night. Don't kill her, men —" He turned impassioned eyes on the leader. "Look at her — so young — so unsuspecting — you can't have the heart to murder a child like that in cold blood."

"Right you are!" exclaimed the man with the ferocious whiskers — he who had been spoken of as Brick Willock. "You'll have to go, pard, but I'm against killing infants."

The leader darted an angry glance at the man who, but for the untoward arrival of Gledware, would have won from him his share of the booty. But his voice was smooth and pleasant as he resumed: "Yes, pard, the kid must die. We couldn't do nothing with her, and if we left her on some door-step, she's sure old enough, and she looks full sharp enough, to tell sufficient to trammel us good and plenty. If we sets her loose in the prairie, she'd starve to death if not found — and if found, it would settle our case. And as Kansas says, this debate must close, or daylight will catch us."

Brick Willock, with terrible oaths, again expressed himself as strongly opposed to this decision.

"Well, Brick," said Red, with a sneer, "do *you* want to take the kid and raise her, yourself? We've either got to do away with her, or keep her hid. Do *you* want to be her nurse, and keep with her in some cave or other while we go foraging?"

Willock muttered deep in his throat, while his companions laughed disdainfully.

"We've had enough of this!" Red declared, his voice suddenly grown hard and cold. "Kansas, take the prisoner; Brick Willock, as you're so fond of the kid, you can carry *her*." He opened the door and a rush of wind extinguished the candle. There was silence while it was being relighted. The flickering light, reddening to a steady glow, revealed no mercy on the scowling countenances about the table, and no shadow of presentiment on that of the still unconscious child.

Red went outside and waited till his brother had drawn forth the quivering man, and Brick Willock had carried out the girl. Then he looked back into the room. "You fellows can stay in here," he said authoritatively. "What we've got to do ain't any easier with a lot of men standing about, looking on."

The man who had relighted the candle, and who crouched to shield it with a hairy hand from the gust, nodded approval. His friends were already gathering together the cards to lose in the excitement of gambling consciousness of what was about to be done. Red closed the door on the scene, and turned to face the night.

The wind came in furious gusts, with brief intervals of calm. There were no clouds, however, and the moon, which had risen not long before, made the prairie almost as light as if morning had dawned. As far as the eye could reach in any direction, nothing was to be seen but the level ground, the unflecked sky, the cabin and the little group near the tethered ponies.

Gledware had already been stationed with his face toward the moon, and Kansas Kimball was calmly examining his pistol. Between them and the horses, Brick Willock had come to a halt, the little girl still sleeping in his powerful arms. Red's eagle eye noted that she had unconsciously slipped an arm about the highwayman's neck, as if by some instinct she would cling the closer to the only one in the band of ten who had spoken for her life.

Red scowled heavily. He had not forgiven Willock for beating him at cards, still less for his per-

sistent opposition to his wishes; and he now resolved that it should be Willock's hand to deal the fatal blow. He had been troubled before to-night by insubordination on the part of this man of bristling whiskers, this knave whose voice was ever for mercy, if mercy were possible. Why should Willock have joined men who were without scruple and without shame? As the leader stared at him sullenly, he reflected that it was just such natures that fail at the last extremity of hardihood, that desert comrades in crime, that turn state's evidence. Yes — Willock should deal the blow, even if Red found it necessary to call all his men from the cabin to enforce the order.

The captain's fears were not groundless. He would have been much more alarmed, could he have known the wonderful thoughts that surged through Willock's brain, and the wonderful emotions that thrilled his heart, at the warm confiding pressure of the arm about his neck.

CHAPTER II

BRICK MAKES A MOVE

AS Kansas Kimball raised his weapon to fire, the man before him uttered a cry of terror and began to entreat for his life. In the full light of the dazzling moon, his face showed all the pallor, all the contortions of a coward who, though believing himself lost, has not the resolution to mask his fear. He poured forth incoherent promises of secrecy, ejaculations of despair and frenzied assurances of innocence.

"Hold on, Kansas!" interposed Red. "There's not a one of the bunch believes that story about the last wagon getting away, and the dying wife. We know this Gledware is a spy, whatever he says, and that he brought the kid along for protection. He knew if we got back to No-Man's Land we couldn't be touched, not being under no jurisdiction, and he wanted to find us with our paint and feathers off. He's a sneaking dog, and a bullet's too good for him. But —" with an oath — "blessed if he don't hate to die worse than any man ever I saw! I don't

mind to spare him a few minutes if he's agreeable. I put it to him — would he rather the kid be put out of the way first, and him afterwards, or does he want the first call?"

"For God's sake, put it off as long as you will!" quavered the prisoner. "I swear I'm no spy. I swear —"

"This is unpleasant," the captain of the highwaymen interposed. "Just you say another word, and I'll put daylight into you with my own hand. Stand there and keep mum, and I'll give you a little breathing space."

Kansas, not without a sigh of relief, lowered his weapon and looked questioningly at his brother. The shadow of the log cabin was upon him, making more sinister his uncouth attire, and his lean vindictive face under the huge Mexican hat. Gledware, not daring to move, kept his eyes fixed on that deep gloom out of which at any moment might spurt forth the red flash of death. From within the cabin came loud oaths inspired by cards or drink, as if the inmates would drown any calls for mercy or sounds of execution that might be abroad in the night.

"Now, Brick Willock," the leader spoke grimly, "take your turn first. That kid's got to die, and

you are to do the trick, and do it without any foolishness."

"I can't," Willock declared doggedly.

"Oh, yes; yes, you can, Brick. You see, we can't 'tend to no infant class, and I ain't hard-hearted enough to leave a five-year-old girl to die of hunger on the prairie; nor do I mean to take her to no town or stage-station as a card for to be tracked by. Oh, yes, you can, Brick, and now's the time."

"Red," exclaimed Willock desperately, "I tell you fair, and I tell you foul, that this little one lives as long as I do."

"And what do you aim to do with her, eh, Brick?"

Willock made no reply. He had formed no plans for his future, or for that of the child; but his left arm closed more tightly about her.

"Now, Brick," said Red slowly, "this ain't the first time you have proved yourself no man for our business, and I call Kansas to witness you've brought this on yourself —"

Without finishing his sentence, Red swiftly raised his arm and fired pointblank at Willock's head as it was defined above the sleeping form. Though famed as an orator, Red understood very well that, at times, action is everything, and there is death

in long speaking. He was noted as a man who never missed his mark; and in the Cimarron country, which belonged to no state and therefore to no court, extensive and deadly had been his practise, without fear of retribution.

Now, however, his bullet had gone astray. The few words to which he had treated himself as an introduction to the intended deed had proved his undoing. They had been enough to warn Willock of what was coming; and just before Kansas had been called on "to witness," that is, an instant before Red fired, Willock had sent a bullet through the threatening wrist. The two detonations were almost simultaneous, and Red's roar of pain, as he dropped his weapon, rang out as an accompaniment to the crash of firearms.

The next instant, Willock, with a second shot from his six-shooter, stretched Kansas on the ground; then, rushing forward with reversed weapon, he brought the butt down on Red's head with such force as to deprive him of consciousness. So swift and deadly were his movements, so wild his appearance as, with long locks streaming in the wind and huge black whiskers hiding all but glittering eyes, aquiline nose and a brief space of tough red skin — so much more like a demon than a man,

it was no wonder that the child, awakened by the firing, screamed with terror at finding her head pressed to his bosom.

"Come!" Willock called breathlessly to the prisoner who still stood with his back to the moon, as if horror at what he had just witnessed rendered him as helpless as he had been from sheer terror. Still holding the screaming child, he darted to the ponies that were tied to the projecting logs of the cabin and hastily unfastened two of the fleetest.

Henry Gledware, awakened as from a trance, bounded to his side. Willock helped him to mount, then placed the child on the saddle in front of him.

"Ride!" he urged hoarsely, "ride for your life! They ain't no other chance for you and the kid — and they ain't no other chance for me."

He leaped upon the second pony.

"Which way?" faltered Gledware, settling in the saddle and grasping the bridle, but without the other's practised ease.

"Follow the moon — I'll ride against the wind — more chance for one of us if we ain't together. Start when I do, for when they hear the horses they'll be out of that door like so many devils turned loose on us. Ride, pardner, ride, and save the kid for God's sake! Now — off we go!"

He gave Gledware's pony a vicious cut with his lariat, and drove the spurs into his own broncho. The thunder of hoofs as they plunged in different directions, caused a sudden commotion within the isolated cabin. The door was flung open, and in the light that streamed forth, Willock, looking back, saw dark forms rush out, gather about the prostrate forms of the two brothers, move here and there in indecision, then, by a common impulse, burst into a swinging run for the horses.

As for Gledware, he never once turned his face. Urging on his horse at utmost speed, and clasping the child to his breast, he raced toward the light. The shadow of horse, man and child, at first long and black, lessened to a mere speck, then vanished with the rider beyond the circle of the level world.

CHAPTER III

FLIGHT

BRICK WILLOCK, galloping toward the Southeast, frequently looked back. He saw the desperadoes leap upon their horses, wheel about in short circles that brought the animals upright, then spring forward in pursuit. He heard the shouting which, though far away, sounded the unmistakable accent of ungovernable fury. In the glaring moonlight, he distinguished plainly the cloud of dust and sand raised by the horses, which the wind lifted in white shapes against the deep blue of the sky. And looking beyond his pursuers toward the rude cabin where the highwaymen had so long held their rendezvous, he knew, because no animate forms appeared against the horizon, that the Kimball brothers lay where he had stretched them — one, senseless from the crashing blow on his head, the other, lifeless from the bullet in his breast.

The little girl and her stepfather had vanished from the smooth open page of the Texas Panhandle — and Brick Willock rejoiced, with a joy new to

him, that these escaped prisoners had not been pursued. It was himself that the band meant to subject to their savage vengeance, and himself alone. The murder of the child was abhorrent to their hearts which had not attained the hardened insensibility of their leader's conscience, and they were willing for the supposed spy to escape, since it spared them the embarrassment of disposing of the little girl.

But Brick Willock had been one of them and he had killed their leader, and their leader's brother, or at least had brought them to the verge of death. If Red Kimball revived, he would doubtless right his own wrongs, should Willock live to be punished. In the meantime, it was for them to treat with the traitor — this giant of a Texan, huge-whiskered, slow of speech, who had ever been first to throw himself into the thick of danger but who had always hung back from deeds of cruelty. He had plundered coaches and wagon-trains with them, he had fought with them against strong bodies of emigrants, he had killed and burned — in the eyes of the world his deeds made him one of them, and his aspect marked him as the most dangerous of the band. But they had always felt the difference — and now they meant to kill him not only because he

had overpowered their leader but because of this difference.

As their bullets pursued him, Willock lay along the body of the broncho, feeling his steed very small, and himself very large — and yet, despite the rain of lead, his pleasure over the escape of the child warmed his heart. The sand was plowed up by his side from the peppering of bullets — but he seemed to feel that innocent unconscious arm about his great neck; the yells of rage were in his ears, but he heard the soft breathing of the little one fast asleep in the midst of her dangers.

He had selected for himself, and for Gledware, ponies that had often been run against each other, and which no others of all Red Kimball's corral could surpass in speed. Gledware and the child were on the pony that Kimball had once staked against the swiftest animal the Indians could produce — and Willock rode the pride of the Indian band, which had almost won the prize. The ponies had been staked on the issue of that encounter — and the highwaymen had retained, by right of craft and force, what the government would not permit its wards to barter or sell.

The race was long but always unequal. The ruffians who had dashed from the scene of the cabin

almost in an even line, scattered and straggled unevenly; now only two were able to send bullets whistling about Willock's head; now only one found it possible to cover the distance. At last even he fell out of range. The Indian pony, apparently tireless, shot on like an arrow driven into the teeth of the wind, sending up behind a cloud of dust that stretched backward toward the baffled pursuers, a long wavering ribbon like a clew left to guide the band into the mysterious depths of the Great American Desert.

When the last of the pursuers found further effort useless, he checked his horse. Willock now sat erect on the broncho's bare back, lightly clasping the halter. Looking behind, he saw seven horsemen in varying degrees of remoteness, motionless, doubtless fixing their wolfish eyes on his fleeing form. As long as he could distinguish these specks against the sky, they remained stationary. To his excited imagination they represented a living wall drawn up between him and the abode of men. Should he ever venture back to that world, he fancied those seven avengers would be waiting to receive him with taunts and drawn weapons.

And his conscience told him that the taunts would be merited, for he had turned traitor, he had

failed in the only virtue on which his fellow criminals prided themselves. Yes, he was a traitor; and by the only justice he acknowledged, he deserved to die. But the child who had lain so trustingly upon his wild bosom, who had clung to him as to a father — she was safe! An unwonted smile crept under the bristling beard of the fugitive, as he urged the pony forward in unrelaxing speed. Should he seek refuge among civilized communities, his crimes would hang over his head — if not discovered, the fear of discovery would be his, day and night. To venture into his old haunts in No-Man's Land would be to expose his back to the assassin's knife, or his breast to ambushed murderers. He dared not seek asylum among the Indians, for while bands of white men were safe enough in the Territory, single white men were at the mercy of the moment's caprice — and certainly, if found astride that Indian pony which the agent had ordered restored to its owner, his life would not be worth a thought.

These were desperate reflections, and the future seemed framed in solitude, yet Brick Willock rode on with that odd smile about the grim lips. The smile was unlike him — but, the whole affair was such an experience as had never entered his most

daring fancy. Never before in his life had he held a child in his arms, still less had he felt the sweet embrace of peaceful slumber. To another man it might have meant nothing; but to this great rough fellow, the very sight of whom had often struck terror to the heart, that experience seemed worth all the privations he foresaw.

The sun had risen when the pony, after a few tottering steps, suddenly sank to earth. Willock unfastened the halter from its neck, tied it with the lariat about his waist, and without pause, set out afoot. If the pony died from the terrible strain of that unremitting flight, doubtless the roving Indians of the plains would find it and try to follow his trail; if it survived he would be safer if not found near it. In either case, swift flight was still imperative, and the shifting sand, beaten out of shape by the constant wind, promised not to retain his footprints.

Though stiff from long riding, the change of motion soon brought renewed vigor. Willock had grown thirsty, and as the sun rose higher and beat down on him from an unclouded sky, his eyes searched the plains eagerly for some shelter that promised water. He did not look in vain. Against the horizon rose the low blue shapes of the Wichita

"Not yet—not just yet"

Mountains, looking at first like flat sheets of cardboard, cut out by a careless hand and set upright in the sand.

As he toiled toward this refuge, not a living form appeared to dispute his sovereignty of the desert world. His feet sank deep in the sand, then trod lightly over vast stretches of short sun-burned mesquit, then again traversed hot shifting reaches of naked sand. The mountains seemed to recede as he advanced, and at times stifling dust and relentless heat threatened to overpower him. With dogged determination he told himself that he might be forced to drop from utter exhaustion, but it would not be yet — not yet — one more mile, or, at least, another half-mile. So he advanced, growing weaker, breathing with more difficulty, but still muttering, "Not yet — not just yet!"

The mountains had begun to spread apart. There were long ranges and short. Here and there, a form that had seemed an integral part of some range, defined itself as distinct from all others, lying like an island of rock in a sea of unbroken desert. Willock was approaching the Wichita Mountains from their southwestern extremity. As far as he could see in one direction, the grotesque forms stretched in isolated chains or single

groups; but in the other, the end was reached, and beyond lay the unbroken waste of the Panhandle.

Swaying on his great legs as with the weakness of an infant, he was now very near the end of the system. A wall of granite, sparsely dotted with green, rose above him to a height of about three hundred and fifty feet. The length of this range was perhaps six miles, its thickness a mile. Concealed among these ridges, he might be safe, but it was no longer possible for him to stand erect; to climb the difficult ledges would be impossible.

He sank to the ground, his eyes red and dimmed. For some time he remained there inert, staring, his brain refusing to work. If yonder stood a white object, between him and the mountain, a curious white something with wheels, might it not be a covered wagon? No, it was a mirage. But was it possible for a mirage to deceive him into the fancy that a wagon stood only a few hundred feet away? Perhaps it was really a wagon. He stared stupidly, not moving. There were no dream-horses to this ghost-wagon. There was no sign of life. If captured by the Indians, it would not have been left intact. But how came a wagon into this barren world?

He stared up at the sun as if to assure himself

that he was awake, then laughed hoarsely, foolishly. The wagon did not melt away. He could crawl that far, though in stretching forth his arm he might grasp but empty air. He began to crawl forward, but the wagon did not move. As it grew plainer in all its details, a new strength came to him. He strove to rise, and after several efforts, succeeded. He staggered forward till his hands grasped one of the wheels. The contact cleared his brain as by a magic touch. It was no dream.

Supporting himself by the sideboard, he drew himself around to the front, the only opening of the canvas room. He looked within. A first look told him that the wagon was fitted up for a long journey, and that its contents had not been disturbed by bandits or Indians. The second look distinguished two objects that excluded from attention all others. Upon a mattress at the rear of the wagon lay a woman, her face covered by a cloth; and near the front seat stood a keg of water. It was impossible to note the rigid form of the woman and the position of the arms and hands without perceiving that she was dead.

The man recognized this truth but it made only a dim impression; that keg of water meant life — and life was a thousandfold more to him than

death. He drew himself upon the seat, snatched at the tin cup beside the keg, and drew out the cloth-covered corn-cob that stopped the flow. Having slaked his thirst, there was mingled with his sense of ineffable content, an overwhelming desire for sleep. He dropped on the second mattress, on which bedclothes were carelessly strewn; his head found the empty pillow that lay indented as it had been left by some vanished sleeper. As his eyelids closed, he fell sound asleep. But for the rising and falling of his powerful breast, he was as motionless as the body of the woman.

Without, the afternoon sun slowly sank behind the mountains casting long shadows over the plains; the wind swirled the sand in tireless eddies, sometimes lifting it high in great sheets, forming sudden dunes; coyotes prowled among the foot-hills and out on the open levels, squatting with eyes fixed on the wagon, uttering sharp quick barks of interrogation. A herd of deer lifted their horns against the horizon, then suddenly bounded away, racing like shadows toward the lowlands of Red River. On the dome-like summit of Mount Welsh, a mile away, a mountain-lion showed his sinuous form against the sky seven hundred feet in air. And from the mountain-side near at hand stared from among the thick

greenery of a cedar, the face of an Indian whose black hair was adorned by a single red feather.

Within the wagon, unconscious of all, in strange fellowship, lay the living and the dead.

CHAPTER IV

AN UNWONTED PRAYER

WHEN Willock started up from the mattress in the covered wagon, the sun had set. Every object, however, was clearly defined in the first glow of the long August twilight, and it needed but a glance to recall the events that had brought him to seek shelter and slumber beside the dead woman. He sat up suddenly, staring from under his long black hair as it fell about his eyes. Accustomed as he was to deeds of violence, even to the sight of men weltering in their life's blood, he was strangely moved by that rigid form with the thin arms folded over the breast, by that white cloth concealing face and hair. A long keen examination of the prairie assured him that no human being was between him and the horizon. He turned again toward the woman. He felt an overpowering desire to look on her face.

For years there had been no women in his world but the abandoned creatures who sought shelter in the resorts of Beer City in No-Man's Land — these,

and the squaws of the reservations, and occasionally a white terrified face among the wagon-trains. As a boy, before running away from home in the Middle West, he had known a different order of beings, and some instinct told him that this woman belonged to the class of his childhood's association. There was imperative need of his hurrying to the mountain, lest, at any moment, a roving band of Indians discover the abandoned wagon; besides this, he was very hungry since his rest, and the wagon was stocked with provisions; nevertheless, to look on the face of the dead was his absorbing desire.

But it was not easy for him to yield to his curiosity, despite his life of crime. Something about the majestic repose of that form seemed to add awe to the mystery of sex; and he crouched staring at the cloth which no breath stirred save the breath of evening.

He believed, now, the story that Henry Gledware had reiterated in accents of abject terror. Surely this was the "last wagon" in that train which Red Kimball had attacked the morning before. Impossible as it had seemed to the highwaymen, Gledware must have been warned of the attack in time to turn about and lash his horses out of danger of discovery. At this spot, Gledware had cut loose the

horses, mounted one with his stepdaughter, leaving the other to go at will. This, then, was the mother of that child whose arm had lain in warm confidence about his neck. On hands and knees, Willock crept to the other mattress and lifted the margin of the large white cloth.

His hand moved stealthily, slowly. Catching sight of something that faintly gleamed at the collar of the dress, he hesitated; his determination to examine the countenance was as firm as ever, but his impulse to put it off as long as possible was even stronger. He bent down to look closer at the ornament; it was a round breastpin of onyx and pearl set in a heavy rim of gold. The warm wind, tempered by approaching night to a grateful balminess, stirred the cloth between his fingers. He stared as if lost in profound meditation. That pin resembled one his mother used to wear; and, somehow, the soothing touch of the wind reminded him of her hand on his forehead. He might have gone back home, if she had not died long ago. Now, in spite of the many years that had passed over her grave, the memory of her came as strong, as sweet, as instinct with the fulness of life, as if he were suddenly wafted back into boyhood.

He did not lift the cloth, after all, but having re-

placed it gently, he searched the wagon for a spade. It was found in the box fastened to the end of the wagon, and with the spade, in the gathering darkness, he dug a grave near the mountainside. Between the strokes of the blade he sent searching glances over the prairie and along the sloping ridges of the overlooking range, but there were no witnesses of his work save the coyotes that prowled like gray shadows across the sands. When the grave was ready he carried thither in his giant's arms the body of the woman on the mattress, and laid it thus to rest. When the sand was smoothed over the place, he carried thither quantities of heavy stones, and broken blocks of granite, to preserve the body from wild beasts.

It was dark when the heap of stones had been arranged in the form of a low pyramid, but though he had not tasted food for twenty-four hours, he lingered beside the grave, his head bent as if still struggling with those unwonted memories of the long ago. At last, as if forced by a mysterious power against which he could no longer resist, he sank upon his knees.

"O God," he prayed aloud, "take care of the little girl."

He waited, but no more words would come —

no other thought. He rose, feeling strangely elated, as if some great good fortune had suddenly come into his possession. It had been like this when the sleeping child lay in his arms; he could almost feel her little cheek against his bosom, and hear the soft music of her breathing.

He went back to the wagon and sat on the tongue, still oblivious to any possible danger of surprise. He spoke aloud, for company:

"She wouldn't have wanted me to look at her — she couldn't have looked natural. Glad I didn't. Great Scott! but that was a first-rate prayer! Wouldn't have thought after thirty years I could have done so well. And it was all there, everything was in them words! If she knew what I was doing, she couldn't have asked nothing more, for I reckon she wouldn't expect a man like *me* to ask no favors for that white-livered cowardly second-husband of hers. I put in all my plea for the little girl. Dinged if I understand how I come to be so intelligent and handy at what's all new business to me! I just says, 'O God, take care of the little girl,'— just them words." He rose with an air of great content and went around to the front in search of provisions. Presently he spoke aloud:

"And as I ain't asked nothing for myself since I run off from home, I guess God won't mind putting the little girl on my expense-account."

CHAPTER V

A NEW ROBINSON CRUSOE

IT came over him with disconcerting suddenness that he had lost a great deal of time, and that every moment spent in the covered wagon was fraught with imminent danger. It was not in his mind that the band of highwaymen might discover his hiding-place. Knowing them as he did, he was sure they would not come so far from their haunts or from the Sante Fe train in pursuit of him. But the Indians roamed the Panhandle, as much at home there as in their reservations — and here they were much more dangerous. Had no savage eye discerned that wagon during the brilliant August day? Might it be that even while he slept at the feet of the dead woman, a feathered head had slipped under the canvas side, a red face had bent over him?

It was a disquieting fancy. Willock told himself that, had such been the case, his scalp-lock would not still adorn his own person; for all that, he was eager to be gone. Instead of eating in

the wagon, he wrapped up some food in a bread-cloth, placed this with a few other articles in a tarpaulin — among them, powder and shot — and, having lifted the keg of water to one shoulder, and the rope-bound tarpaulin to the other, he left the wagon with a loaded gun in his hand.

Twilight had faded to starlight and the mountain range stood blackly defined against the glittering stars. It was easy to find his way, for on the level sands there were no impediments, and when the mountain was reached, a low divide offered him easy passage up the ascent. For the most part the slopes were gradual and in steeper places, ledges of granite, somewhat like giant stairs, assisted him to the highest ridge. From this vantage-point he could see the level plain stretching away on the farther side; he could count the ridges running parallel to the one on which he had paused, and note the troughs between, which never descended to the level ground to deserve the name of valleys. Looking down upon this tortured mass of granite, he seemed gazing over a petrified sea that, in the fury of a storm, had been caught at the highest dashing of its waves, and fixed in threatening motion which throughout the ages would remain as

calm and secure as the level waste that stretched from the abrupt walls in every direction.

On that first ridge he paused but a moment, lest his figure be outlined against the night for the keen gaze of some hidden foe. Steadying the keg with one hand and holding his gun alert, he descended into the first trough and climbed to the next ridge, meaning to traverse the mile of broken surface, thus setting a granite wall between him and the telltale wagon. The second ridge was not so high as the outer wall, and he paused here, feeling more secure. The ground was fairly level for perhaps fifty yards before its descent to the next rolling depression where the shadows lay in unrelieved gloom. On the crest, about him, the dim light defined broken boulders and great blocks of granite in grotesque forms, some suggesting fantastic monsters, others, in sharp-cut or rounded forms seemingly dressed by Cyclopean chisels.

The fugitive was not interested in the dimly defined shapes about him; his attention had been attracted by a crevice in the smooth rock ledge at his feet. This ledge, barren of vegetation, and as level as a slab of rough marble, showed a long black line like a crack in a stone pavement. At the man's feet the crevice was perhaps two feet

wide, but as it stretched toward the west it narrowed gradually, and disappeared under a mass of disorganized stones, as a mere slit in the surface.

Presently he set the keg and the tarpaulin-ball on the ground, not to rest his shoulders, but in order to sink on his knees beside the crevice. He put his face down over it, listening, peering, but making no discovery. Then he unwound the lariat from about his waist, tied it to the rope that had been a halter, and having fastened a stone to one end, lowered it into the black space. The length of the lariat slipped through his fingers and the rope was following when suddenly the rock found lodgment at the bottom. On making this discovery he drew up the lariat, opened the cloth containing the food, and began to eat rapidly and with evident excitement. He did not fail to watch on all sides as he enjoyed his long delayed meal, and while he ate and thus watched, he thought rapidly. When the first cravings of appetite were partly satisfied, he left his baker's bread and bacon on a stone, tied up the rest of the food in its cloth, rolled this in the tarpaulin, and lowered it by means of the lariat into the crevice. Then, having tied the end of the rope to the gun-barrel, he placed the gun across

the crevice and swung himself down into the gloom.

The walls of the crevice were so close together that he was able to steady his knees against them, but as he neared the bottom they widened perceptibly. His first act on setting foot to the stone flooring was to open the tarpaulin, draw forth a candle and a box of matches, and strike a light. The chamber of granite in which he stood was indeed narrow, but full of interest and romance. The floor was about the same width in all its length, wide enough for Willock, tall as he was, to stretch across the passage. It extended perhaps a hundred feet into the heart of the rock, showing the same smooth walls on either side. The ceiling, however, was varied, as the outward examination had promised. Overhead the stars were seen at ease through the two feet of space at the top; but as he carried his candle forward, this opening decreased, to be succeeded presently by a roof, at first of jumbled stones crushed together by outward weight, then of a smooth red surface extending to the end.

The floor was the same everywhere save at its extremities. At the point of Willock's descent, it dipped away in a narrow line that would not have admitted a man's body. At the other end, where

he now stood, it suddenly gave way to empty space. It came to an end so abruptly that there was no means of discovering how deep was the narrow abyss beyond. Possibly it descended a sheer three hundred feet, the depth of the ridge at that place. On the smooth floor which melted to nothingness with such sinister and startling suddenness, the candlelight revealed the skeleton of a man lying at the margin of the unknown depths. Mingled with the bones that had fallen apart with the passing of centuries, was a drawn sword of blackened hilt and rusted blade — a sword of old Spanish make — and in the dust of a rotted purse lay a small heap of gold coins of strange design.

"Well, pard," said Brick Willock grimly, "you come here first and much obliged to you. You've told me two things: that once in here, no getting out — unless you bring along your ladder; and what's better still, nobody has been here since you come, or that wouldn't be my money! And now having told me all you got to say, my cavalier, I guess we'd better part." He raked the bones into a heap, and dashed them into the black gulf. He did not hear them when they struck bottom, and the sinister silence gave him an odd thrill. He shook his head. "If I ever roll out of bed here,"

he said, "me and you will spend the rest of the time together, pardner."

He did not linger for idle speculation, but drew himself up his dangling rope, and in a short time was once more outside the place of refuge. Always on the lookout for possible watchers, he snatched up his bread and meat, and ate as he hastened over the outer ridge and down the rugged side toward the wagon. Here he filled a box with canned provisions and a side of bacon, and on top of this he secured a sack of flour. It made a heavy burden, but his long sleep had restored him to his wonted strength, and he could not be sure but this trip to the wagon would be his last. With some difficulty he hoisted the box to his herculean shoulder, and grasping a spade and an ax in his disengaged hand, toiled upward to his asylum.

When the crevice in the mountain-top was reached, he threw the contents of the box down into the tarpaulin which he had spread out to receive it, and having broken up the box with the ax, cast the boards down that they might fall to one side of the provisions. This done, he returned to the wagon, from above invisible, but which, when he stood on the plain, loomed dim and shapeless against the night.

There were great stores of comforts and even some luxuries in the wagon, and it was hard for him to decide what to take next; evidently Henry Gledware and his wife had expected to live in their wagon after reaching their destination, for there was a stove under the seat, and a stovepipe fastened to one side of the wagon.

"If the Indians don't catch me at this business," said Willock, looking at the stove, "I'll get you too!" He believed it could be lowered between the stone lips of his cave-mouth, for it was the smallest stove he had ever seen, surely less than two feet in width. "I'll get you in," said the plunderer decidedly, "or something will be broke!"

For the present, however, he took objects more appropriate to summer: the mattress upon which he had passed the afternoon, a bucket in which he packed boxes of matches, a quantity of candles, soap, and the like. This bucket he put in the middle of the mattress and flanked it with towels and pillows, between which were inserted plates, cups and saucers. "I'll just take 'em all," he muttered, groping for more dishes, "I might have company!"

The mattress once doubled over its ill-assorted contents, he was obliged to rope both ends before he could carry it in safety. This load, heavier than

the last, he succeeded in getting to the crevice, and as he poised it over the brink a few yards from where the tarpaulin lay, he apostrophized it with —"Break if you want to; pieces is good enough for your Uncle Brick!"

When he left the wagon with his next burden, he was obliged to bend low under buckets, tools, cans and larger objects. As he moved slowly to preserve equilibrium, he began to chuckle. "Reckon if the Injuns saw me now," he said aloud, "they'd take me for an elephant with the circus-lady riding my back!" At the crevice, he flung in all that would pass the narrow opening intact, and smashed up what was too large, that their fragments might also be hidden.

"Pshaw!" grunted Willock, as he started back toward the wagon, mopping his brow on his shirt-sleeve, "Robinson Crusoe wasn't in it! Wonder why he done all that complaining when he had a nice easy sea to wash him and his plunder ashore?"

He was beginning to feel the weariness of the morning return, and the load that cleaned out the wagon-bed left him so exhausted that he fell down on the ground beside the crevice, having thrown in his booty. Here, with his gun at his side and a pistol in his hand, he fell fast asleep.

He lay there like a man of stone until some inner consciousness began beating at the door of his senses, warning him that in no great time the moon would rise. He started up in a state of dazed bewilderment, staring at the solemn stars, the vague outlines of giant rocks about him and the limitless sea of darkness that flowed away from the mountain-top indicating, but not defining, the surrounding prairie.

"Get up from here!" Willock commanded himself. He obeyed rather stiffly, but when he was on his feet, ax in hand, he made the trip to the wagon nimbly enough. As he drew near, he saw gray shadows slipping away — they were wolves. He shouted at them disdainfully, and without pause began removing the canvas from over the wagon. When that was done, his terrific blows resolved the wagon-bed to separated boards, somewhat splintered but practically intact. By means of the wrench he removed the wheels and separated the parts of the wagon-frame. Always, when he had obtained enough for a load, he made that toilsome journey to his retreat. He took the four wheels at one time, rolling them one by one, lifting them singly from ledge to ledge.

The last of his work was made easier because the

darkness had begun to lift. Suddenly a glow appeared at the rim of the world, to be followed, as it seemed, almost immediately by the dazzling edge of an immense silver shield. The moon rolled over the desert waste and rested like a solid wheel of fire on the sand. Instantly for miles and miles there was not a shadow on the earth. The level shafts of light bathed with grotesque luminous distinction the countless prairie-dogs which, squatting before the mouths of their retreats, barked at the quick betrayal. Coyotes, as if taken by surprise, swung swiftly toward remote mountain fastnesses, their backs to the light.

When Willock made his last and slowest trip to the ridge, his feet dragging like lead, there was nothing to show that a covered wagon had stood at the edge of the prairie; the splinters of the final demolition had already mingled indistinguishably with the wind-driven sand. Arrived at the second ridge, which was still in darkness, he took pains that no telltale sign should be left on the smooth expanse of granite to indicate the near presence of a man. Swinging to the lariat that was now tied to a short plank, he lowered himself into the midst of the débris with which that part of his floor was strewn. Poised on top of the heap of boards that

had formed the sides of the wagon, he pushed upward with a longer plank and dislodged the one from which the rope dangled. It fell at his feet.

Provided with nails, a hammer and plenty of lumber, it would not be difficult to construct a ladder for egress. At present, he was too tired to provide for the future. He left the spoils just as they had fallen, except for the old wagon-tongue and a board or two with which he built a barricade against the unknown depths at the farthest margin of the floor. Then drawing the mattress to one side, and clearing it of its contents, he fell upon it with a sigh of comfort, and was again plunged into slumber — slumber prolonged far into the following day.

CHAPTER VI

A MYSTERIOUS GUEST

WHEN he awoke, a bar of sunshine which at first he mistook for an outcropping of Spanish gold, glowed against the granite wall of his mountain-top retreat. He rose in leisurely fashion — henceforth there would be plenty of time, years of it, running to waste with useless days. After eating and partaking sparingly of the brackish water of the keg, he nailed together two long sideboards of the dismembered wagon; and having secured these end to end, he fastened in parallel strips to the surface short sticks as steps to his ladder. This finished, he made a rope-ladder. The ladder of boards was for use in leaving the cave; the rope-ladder, which he meant to hide under some boulder near the crevice, could be used in making the descent.

The formless mass of inchoate débris, the result of his toilsome journeys of the night before, was left as it had fallen — there would be time enough to sort all that, a hundred times. At present, he

would venture forth with the sole object of examining his surroundings. "This suits me exactly," he muttered, with a good-humored chuckle; "just doing one thing at a time, and being everlasting slow about doing that."

Fastening the rope-ladder about his waist, he scaled the boards, and on reaching the top, cast them down. First, he looked all about, but no living creature was in sight. "This is just to my hand," he said aloud, seeking a suitable hiding-place for the rope-ladder; "I always did despise company."

Stowing away the rope-ladder in a secure fissure between two giant blocks of granite, each the size of a large two-story house, he crossed to the first ridge, and looked out over the prairie, to triumph over the vacant spot where the covered wagon had stood fifteen hours before. "No telling what a man can do," he exclaimed admiringly, "that is to say, if his name is Brick Willock."

His eyes wandered to the mound of stones built over the woman's grave. His prayer recurred to his mind. "Well, God," he said, looking up at the cloudless sky, "I guess you're doing it!" After this expression of faith, he turned about and set forth to traverse the mountain range. Passing

the ridge which he already looked upon as home, he crossed other ridges of varying height, and at the end of a mile reached the southern limit of the mountain. Like the northern side the southern elevation was nearly four hundred feet, as if the granite sea had dashed upward in fiercest waves, in a last futile attempt to inundate the plain. The southern wall was precipitous, and Willock, looking down the cedar-studded declivity, could gaze directly on the verdant levels that came to the very foot.

He stood at the center of an enormous horseshoe formed on the southwest by the range curving farther toward the south, and on his left hand, by the same range sweeping in a quarter-circle toward the southeast. The mouth of this granite half-circle was opened to the south, at least a quarter-mile in width; but on his left, a jutting spur almost at right angles to the main range, and some hundreds of yards closer to his position, shot across the space within the horseshoe bend, in such fashion that an observer, standing on the plain, would have half his view of the inner concave expanse shut off, except that part of the high north wall that towered above the spur.

Nor was this all. Behind the perpendicular arm,

or spur, that ran out into the sea of mesquit, rose a low hill that was itself in the nature of an inner spur although, since it failed to reach the mountain, it might be regarded as a long flat island, surrounded by the calm green tide. This innermost arm, or island, was so near the mountain, that the entrance to it opened into a curved inner world of green, was narrow and strongly protected. The cove thus formed presented a level floor of ten or twelve acres, and it was directly down into this cove that Willock gazed. It looked so peaceful and secure, and its openness to the sunshine was so alluring, that Willock resolved to descend the steep wall. To do so at that point was impracticable, but the ridge was unequal and not far to the right, sank to a low divide, while to the left, a deep gully thickly set with cedars, elms, scrub-oaks and thorn trees invited him with its steep but not difficult channel, to the ground.

"Here's a choice," observed Willock, as he turned toward the divide; "guess I'll go by the front, and save the back stairs for an emergency." The gully was his back stairs. He was beginning to feel himself rich in architectural possibilities. When he reached the plain he was outside of a line of hummocks that effec-

tually hid the cove from sight, more effectually because of a dense grove of pecans that stood on either side of the grass-grown dunes. Instead of crossing the barrier, he started due south for the outer prairie, and when at last he stood midway between the wide jaws of the mountain horseshoe, he turned and looked intently toward the cove.

It was invisible, and his highest hopes were realized. From this extended mouth he could clearly see where the first spur shot out into the sand, and beyond that, he could see how, at a distance, the sheer wall of granite rose to the sky; but there was nothing to suggest that behind that scarred arm another projection parallel to it might be discovered. He walked toward the spur, always watching for a possible glimpse of the cove. When he stood on the inner side, his spirits rose higher. The long flat island that he had discerned from the mountain-top was here not to be defined because, on account of its lowness and of the abrupt wall beyond, it was mingled indistinguishably with the perspective of the range. Concealment was made easier from the fact that the ground of the cove was lower than all the surrounding land.

Willock now advanced on the cove and found himself presently in a snug retreat that would have

filled with delight the heart of the most desperate highwayman, or the most timid settler. On the north was, of course, the towering mountain-wall, broken by the gully in the protection of whose trees one might creep up or down without detection. On the east, the same mountain-wall curved in high protection. In front was the wide irregular island, low, indeed, but happily high enough to shut out a view of the outside world. At the end of this barricade there was a gap, no wider than a wagon-road, along the side of which ran the dry channel of a mountain stream — the continuation of the gully that cut the mountain-wall from top to base — but even this gap was high enough to prevent observation from the plain.

No horsemen could enter the cove save by means of that low trench, cut as by the hand of man in the granite hill, and as Indian horsemen were the only enemies to be dreaded, his watchfulness need be concentrated only on that one point. "Nothing like variety," observed Willock cheerfully. "This will do capital for my summer home! I'm going to live like a lord — while I'm living."

He examined the ground and found that it was rich and could be penetrated easily, even to the the very foot of the mountain. "I'll just get my

spade," he remarked, "as I ain't got nothing else to do." In deliberate slowness he returned up the divide, and got the spade from his retreat, then brought it to the cove. Selecting a spot near the channel of the dried-up torrent, he began to dig, relieved to find that he did not strike rock.

"I guess," he said, stopping to lean on his spade, as he stared at the mountain, "the earth just got too full of granite and biled over, but was keerful to spew it upwards, so's to save as much ground as it could, while relieving its feelings."

Presently the earth on his blade began to cling from dampness. "When I digs a well," he remarked boastingly, "what I want is water, and that's what I gets. As soon as it's deep enough I'll wall her up with rocks and take the longest drink that man ever pulled off, that is to say, when it was nothing but common water. They ain't nothing about water to incite you to keep swallowing when you have enough. Of a sudden you just naturally leggo and could drown in it without wanting another drop. That's because it's nature. Art is different. I reckon a nice clean drinking-joint and a full-stocked bar is about the highest art that can stimulate a man. But in nature, you know when you've got enough."

After further digging he added, "And I got about enough of *this!* I mean the mountains and the plains and the sand and the wind and the cave and the cove —" he wiped away the dripping sweat and looked at the sun. "Yes, and of you, too!" He dropped the spade, and sat down on the heap of dirt. "Oh, Lord, but I'm lonesome! I got plenty to say, but nobody to listen at me."

He clasped his great hands about his knee, and stared sullenly at the surrounding ramparts of red and brown granite, dully noting the fantastic layers, the huge round stones that for ages had been about to roll down into the valley but had never started, and others cut in odd shapes placed one upon another in columns along the perpendicular wall. The sun beat on the long matted hair of his bared head, but the ceaseless wind brought relief from its pelting rays. He, however, was conscious neither of the heat nor of the refreshing touch.

At last he rose slowly to his towering legs and picked up the spade. "You're a fool, Brick Willock," he said harshly. "Ain't you got that well to dig? And then can't you go for your kaig and bring it here, and carry it back full of fresh water? Dinged if there ain't enough doings in your world to furnish out a daily newspaper!" He began to

dig, adding in an altered tone: "And Brick, *he* says — 'Nothing ain't come to the worst, as long as you're living,' says Brick!"

He was proud of the well when it was completed; the water was cold and soft as it oozed up through clean sand, and the walls of mud-mortised rocks promised permanency. One did not have to penetrate far into the bottom-lands of that cove to find water which for unnumbered years had rushed down the mountainside in time of rain-storms to lie, a vast underground reservoir, for the coming of man. Willock could reach the surface of the well by lying on his stomach and scooping with his long arm. He duly carried out his program, and when the keg was filled with fresh water, it was time for dinner.

After a cold luncheon of sliced boiled ham and baker's bread, he returned to the cove, where he idled away the afternoon under the shade of tall cedar trees whose branches came down to the ground, forming impenetrable pyramids of green.

Stretched out on the short buffalo-grass he watched the white flecks follow one another across the sky; he observed the shadows lengthening from the base of the western arm of the horseshoe till they threatened to swallow up him and his bright speck

of world; he looked languidly after the flights of birds, and grinned as he saw the hawks dart into round holes in the granite wall not much larger than their bodies — those mysterious holes perforating the precipice, seemingly bored there by a giant auger.

"Go to bed, pards," he called to the hawks. "I reckon it's time for me, too!" He got up — the sun had disappeared behind the mountain. He stretched himself, lifting his arms high above his head and slowly drawing his fists to his shoulder, his elbows luxuriously crooked. "One thing I got," he observed, "is room, plenty! Well —" he started toward the divide for his upward climb, "I've lived a reasonable long life; I am forty-five; but I do think that since I laid down under that tree, I have thought of everything I ever done or said since I was a kid. Guess I'll save the future for another afternoon — and after that, the Lord knows what I'm going to do with my brain, it's that busy."

The next day he began assorting the contents of his granite home, moving to the task with conscientious slowness, stopping a dozen times to make excursions into the outside world. By diligent economy of his working moments, he succeeded in covering almost two weeks in the labor of put-

ting his house into order. His bedroom was next to the barricade that separated the long stone excavation from the bottomless abyss. Divided from the bedroom by an imaginary line, was the storeroom of provisions. The cans and boxes were arranged along the floor with methodical exactitude. Different varieties of fruit and preserves were interspersed in such fashion that none was repeated until every variety had been passed.

"I begins with this can of peaches," said Willock, laying his finger upon the beginning of the row — "then comes apples, pears, plums; then peaches, apples, pears, plums; then peaches, apples, pears, plums; then peaches — blest if I don't feel myself getting sick of 'em already. . . . And now my meats: bacon, ham. My breadstuffs: loaves, crackers. My fillers: sardines, more sardines, more sardines, likewise canned tomatoes. Let me see — is it too much to say that I eats a can of preserves in two days? Maybe three. That is, till I sickens. I begins with peach-day. This is Monday. Say Thursday begins my apple-days. I judge I can worm myself down through the list by this time next month. One thing I am sot on: not to save nothing if I can bring my stomach to carry the burden with a willing hand.

I'll eat mild and calm, but steadfast. Brick Willock he says, 'Better starve all at once, when there's nothing left, than starve a little every day,' says Brick. 'When it's a matter of agony,' says he, 'take the short cut.'"

In arranging his retreat, he had left undisturbed the wagon-tongue, since removing it from the end of the floor for a more secure barricade; it had stood with several of the sideboards against the wall, as if Brick meditated using them for a special purpose. Such was indeed his plan, and it added some zest to his present employment to think of what he meant to do next; this was nothing less than to make a dugout in the cove.

To this enterprise he was prompted not only by a desire to vary his monotonous days, but to insure safety from possible foes. Should a skulking savage, or, what would be worse, a stray member of the robber band catch sight of him among the hills, the spy would spread the news among his fellows. A relentless search would be instituted, and even if Willock succeeded in escaping, the band would not rest till it had discovered his hiding-place. If they came on the dugout, their search would terminate, and his home in the crevice would escape investigation; but if there was no dugout to satisfy

curiosity, the crevice would most probably be explored.

"Two homes ain't too many for a character like me, nohow," remarked Brick, as he set the wagon-tongue and long boards on end to be drawn up through the crevice. "Cold weathor will be coming on in due time — say three or four months — and what's that to me? a mere handful of time! Well, I don't never expect to make a fire in my cave, I'll set my smoke out in the open where it can be traced without danger to my pantry shelves."

He was even slower about building the dugout than he had been in arranging the miscellaneous objects in the cavern on top of the mountain. Transporting the timbers across a mile of ridges and granite troughs was no light work; and when his tools and material were in the cove, the digging of the dugout was protracted because of the closeness of water to the surface. At last he succeeded in excavating the cellar at a spot within a few yards of the mountain, without penetrating moistened sand. He leveled down the walls till he had a chamber about twelve feet square. Over this he placed the wagon-tongue, converting it into the ridge-pole, which he set upon forks cut from the near-by cedars. Having trimmed branches of the

trees in the grove, he laid them as close together as possible, slanting from the ridge-pole to the ground, and over these laid the bushy cedar branches. This substantial roof he next covered with dirt, heaping it up till no glimpse of wood was visible under the hard-packed dome. The end of the dugout was closed up in the same way except for a hole near the top fitted closely to the stovepipe and packed with mud.

Of the sideboards he fashioned a rude frame, then a door to stand in it, fitted into grooves that it might be pushed and held into place without hinges. "Of course I got to take down my door every time I comes in or out," remarked Willock, regarding his structure with much complacency, "but they's nothing else to do, and I got to be occupied."

When he had transported the stove to the cove, he set it up with a tingle of expectant pleasure. It was to be his day of housewarming, not because the weather had grown cold, but that he might celebrate.

"This here," he said, "is to be a red-letter day, a day plumb up in X, Y and Z. I got to take my gun and forage for some game; then I'll dress my fresh meat and have a cooking. I'll bring over some grub to keep it company. Let's see — this is

plum-day, ain't it?" He stood meditating, stroking his wild whiskers with a grimy hand. "Oh, Lord, yes, I believe it *is* plum-day! 'Well, they ain't nothing the way you would have made it yourself,' says Brick, 'not even though it's you as made it.' This here *is* plum-day, and that there can of plums will shore be opened. And having my first fire gives me a chance to open up my sack of flour; won't I hold carnival! What I feels sorry about myself is knowing how I'm going to feel after I've et all them victuals. I believe I'll take a bath, too, in that pool over yonder in the grove. Ain't I ever going to use that there soap? . . . But I don't say as I will. Don't seem wuth while. They ain't nobody to see me, and I feels clean insides. As I takes it, you do your washing for them as neighbors with you. If I had a neighbor! — just a dog, a little yaller dog — or some chickens to crow and cackle —"

He broke off, to lean despondently on his gun. He remained thus motionless for a long time, his earth-stained garments, unkempt hair, hard dark hands and gloomy eye marking him as the only object in the bright sunshine standing forth unresponsive to nature's smile.

He started into life with a shrug of his powerful

shoulders. "It's just like you, Brick, to spoil a festibul-day with your low idees! Why don't you keep them idees for a rainy day? Just lay up them regrets and hankerings for the first rainy day, and then be of a piece with the heavens and earth. 'If you can't stay cheerful while the sun's shining,' says Brick, 'God's wasting a mighty nice big sun on *you!*'"

Thus admonishing himself, and striving desperately for contentment, he strode forth from the only exit of the cove, and skirted the southern wall of the range, looking for game. It was late in the afternoon when he returned with the best portions of a deer swung over his shoulder. By this time he was desperately hungry, and the prospect of the first venison since his exile stirred his pulses, and gave to the bright scene a cheerful beauty it had not before worn to his homesick heart. He trudged up to the narrow door of the dugout which was closed, just as he had left it, and having carried a noble haunch of venison to the pool to be washed, he descended the dirt steps and set the door to one side. Without at first understanding why, he became instantly aware that some one had been there during his absence.

Of course, as soon as his eyes could penetrate the

semi-gloom sufficiently to distinguish small objects, he saw the proof; but even before that, the air seemed tingling with some strange personality. He stood like a statue, gazing fixedly. His alert eyes, always on guard, had assured him that the cove was deserted — there was no use to look behind him. Whoever had been there must have scaled the mountain, and had either crossed to the plain on the north, or was hiding behind the rocks. What held his eyes to the stove was a heap of tobacco, and a clay pipe beside it. Among the stores removed from the wagon, tobacco had been found in generous quantity, but during the month now elapsed, had been sadly reduced. Willock, however, was not pleased to find the new supply; on the contrary his emotions were confused and alarmed. Had the tobacco been ten times as much, it could not have solaced him for the knowledge that the dugout had been visited.

After a few minutes of immobility, he entered, placed the meat on a box, and departed softly, closing the door behind him. Casting apprehensive glances along the mountainside, he stole toward it, and made his way up the gully, completely hidden by the straggling line of trees and underbrush, till he stood on the summit. He approached each ridge

with extreme caution, as if about to storm the barricade of an enemy; thus he traveled over the range without coming on the traces of his mysterious visitor. Not pausing at the crevice, he went on to the outer northern ridge of the range, and lying flat among some high rocks, looked down.

He counted seventeen men near the spot from which he had removed the wagon. Fifteen were on horseback and two riderless horses explained the presence of the two on foot. All of them had drawn up in a circle about the heap of stones that covered the woman's burial-place. Of the seventeen, sixteen were Indians, painted and adorned for the war-path. The remaining man, he who stood at the heap of stones beside the chief, was a white man, and at the first glance, Willock recognized him; he was the dead woman's husband, Henry Gledware.

Brick's mind was perplexed with vain questionings: Was it Gledware who had visited his dugout, or the Indians? Did the pipe and tobacco indicate a peace-offering? What was the relationship between Gledware and these Indians? Was he their prisoner, and were they about to burn him upon the heap of stones? He did not seem alarmed. Had he made friends with the chief by promising to conduct him to the deserted wagon? If so, what

would they think in regard to the wagon's disappearance? Had the dugout persuaded them that there was no other retreat in the mountains?

While Brick watched in agitated suspense, several Indians leaped to the ground at a signal from the chief and advanced toward the white man. The chief turned his back upon the company, and started toward the mountain, his face turned toward Brick's place of observation. He began climbing upward, the red feather in his hair gleaming against the green of the cedars. Brick had but to remain where he was, to reach forth his hand presently and seize the warrior — but in that case, those on the plain would come swarming up the ascent for vengeance.

Brick darted from his post, swept like a dipping swallow across the ravine, and snatching up the rope-ladder from its nook under the boulder, scurried down into the granite chamber. Having removed the ladder, he crept to the extremity of the excavation, and with his back against the wall and his gun held in readiness, awaited the coming of the chief. After the lapse of many minutes he grew reassured; the Indian, thinking the dugout his only home, had passed the crevice without the slightest suspicion.

However, lest in thrusting forth his head, he call

attention to his home in the rock, he kept in retreat the rest of that day, nor did he venture forth that night. After all, the housewarming did not take place. The stove remained cold, the tobacco and pipe upon it were undisturbed, and the evening meal consisted notably of plums.

CHAPTER VII

RED FEATHER

ONE bright warm afternoon in October two years later, Brick Willock sat smoking his pipe before the open door of his dugout, taking advantage of the mountain-shadow that had just reached that spot. In repose, he always sat, when in the cove, with his face toward the natural roadway leading over the flat hill-island into the farther reach of the horseshoe. It was thus he hoped to prevent surprise from inimical horsemen, and it was thus that, on this particular afternoon, he detected a shadow creeping over the reddish-brown stone passage before its producing cause rode suddenly against the background of the blue sky.

At first glimpse of that shadow of a feathered head, Willock flung himself down the dirt steps leading to the open door; now, lying flat, he directed the barrel of his gun over the edge of the level ground, covering an approaching horseman. As only one Indian came into view, and as this Indian was armed in a manner as astounding as it was irresistible,

Willock rose to his height of six-foot-three, lowered his weapon, and advanced to meet him.

When he was near, the Indian — the same chief from whom Willock had fled on the day of his intended housewarming — this Indian sprang lightly to the ground, and lifted from the horse that defense which he had borne in front of him on penetrating the cove; it was the child for whose sake Willock had separated himself from his kind.

At first, Willock thought he was dreaming one of those dreams that had solaced his half-waking hours, for he had often imagined how it would be if that child were in the mountains to bear him company. But however doubtful he might be regarding her, he took no chances about the Indian, but kept his alert gaze fixed on him to forestall any design of treachery.

The Indian made a sign to the little girl to remain with the horse; then he glided forward, holding somewhat ostentatiously, a filled pipe in his extended hand. He had evidently come to knit his soul to that of his white brother while the smoke from their pipes mingled on the quiet air, forming a frail and uncertain monument to the spirit of peace.

"Was it you that left a pipe and tobacco on my stove two years ago?" Willock asked abruptly.

"Yes. You got it? We will smoke." He seated himself gravely on the ground.

Willock went into the cabin, and brought out the clay pipe. They smoked. Willock cast covert glances toward the girl. She stood slim and straight, her face rigid, her eyes fixed on the horse whose halter she held. Her limbs were bare and a blanket that descended to her knees seemed her only garment. The face of the sleeping child of five was the same, however, as this of the seven-year-old maid, except that it had grown more beautiful; the wealth of glowing brown hair made amends for all poverty of attire.

Willock was wonderfully moved; so much so that his manner was harsh, his voice gruff in the extreme. "What are you going to do with that girl?" he demanded.

"You take her?" inquired the chief passively.

"Yes — I take her."

"Good!" The Indian smoked serenely.

"Where'd you find her?"

"Not been lost. Her safe all time. Sometime in one village — here, then there, two, three — move her about. Safe all time. I never forget. There she is. You take her?"

"I said so, didn't I? Where's her daddy?"

The Indian said nothing, only smoked, his eyes fixed on space.

Willock raised his voice. "Must I ask *her* where he is?"

"Her not know. Her not seen him one, two year. She say him dead."

"Oh, he's dead, is he?"

"Him safe, too." He looked at the sun. "Long trail before me. Then I leave her. I go, now."

"Not much you don't go! Not *this* minute. Where is that girl's daddy?"

No answer.

"If he's safe, why hasn't she been with him all this time?"

"Me big chief."

"Oh, yes, I judge you are. But that's nothing to me. *I'm* big chief, too. I own this corner of the universe — and I want to know about that girl's daddy."

"Him great man."

"Well — go ahead; tell the rest of it."

"Him settle among my tribe; him never leave our country. Big country, fat country, very rich. Him change name — everything; him one of us. Marry my daughter. *That* girl not his daughter —

daughter of dead woman. Keep her away from him all time so him never see white man, white woman, white child, forget white people, be good Indian. The girl make him think of dead woman. When a man marry again, not good to remember dead woman. Him think girl dead, but no care, no worry, no sad. *She* never his daughter — dead woman's daughter. All his path is white, no more blue. Him very glad, every day — my daughter his wife. She keep scalp-knife from his head. My braves capture — they dance about fire, she say 'No.' She marry him. Their path is white; the sky over them is white."

He rose, straight as an arrow, and turned his grim face toward the horse.

"I see. And you don't want to tell me where he is, because you want him to forget he is a white man?"

"Him always live with my people; him marry my daughter."

"Tell me this; is he far away?"

"Very far. Many days. You never find him. You stay here, keep girl, and me and my people your friends. You come after him — not your friends!"

"Why, bless your heart, I never want to see that

man again; your daughter is welcome to him, but I'm afraid she's got a bad bargain. This girl's just as I'd have her — unencumbered. I'm *awful* glad you come, pardner! Whenever you happen to be down in this part of Texas, drop in and make us a visit!"

With every passing moment, Willock was realizing more keenly what this amazing sequel to the past meant to him. He would not only have company in his dreary solitude, but, of all company, the very one he yearned for to comfort his heart. "Give us your paw, old man — shake. You bet I'll take her!"

He strode forward and addressed the girl: "Are you willing to stay with me, little one?"

She shrank back from the wild figure. During his two years of hiding in the mountains, Willock had cared nothing for his personal appearance. His garments, on disintegrating had been replaced by skins, thus giving an aspect of assorted colors and materials rather remarkable. Only when driven by necessity had he ventured on long journeys to the nearest food-station, carrying the skins obtained by trapping, and bringing back fresh stores of provisions and tobacco on the pony purchased by the Spanish gold.

Willock was greatly disconcerted by her attitude. He said regretfully, "I guess I've been so much with myself that I ain't noticed my outside as a man ought. Won't you make your home with me, child?" He held out his rough hand appealingly.

She retreated farther, saying with disapproval, "Much hair!"

Willock laid his hand on his breast, returning, "Much heart!"

"Him white," said the Indian, swinging himself upon his horse. "Him save your life. Sometime me come visit, come eat, come stay with you."

As he wheeled about, she held out her arms toward him, crying wildly, "Don't go! Don't leave me! Him much hair!"

The Indian dashed away without turning his head.

"Good lord, honey," exclaimed Willock, at his wits' ends, "don't cry! I can't do nothing if you *cry*. Won't you come look at your new home?" He waved eagerly toward the dugout.

"Hole in the ground!" cried the girl desperately. "I want my tepee. Am I a prairie-dog?"

"No, honey, you ain't. You and me is both white, and we ought to live together; it ain't right

for you to live with red people that kills and burns your own kith and kin."

She looked at him repellently through her streaming tears. "Big hair!" she cried. "Big hair!"

"And must I cut it off? I'll make my head as smooth as yonder bald-headed mountain-peak if it'll keep you from crying. Course you ain't seen nobody with whiskers amongst them Indians, but *they* ain't your people. Your people is white, they are like me, they grows hair. But I'll shave and paint myself red, and hunt for feathers, if that's what you want."

Her sobbing grew less violent. Despite his ferocious aspect, no fear could remain in her heart at sight of that distressed countenance, at sound of those conciliatory tones. Willock, observing that the tempest was abating, continued in his most appealing manner:

"I'm going to do whatever you say, honey, and you're going to be the queen of the cove. Ain't you never been lonesome amongst all them red devils? Ain't you missed your poor mammy as died crossing the plains? It was me that buried her. Ain't you never knowed how it felt to want to lay your head on somebody's shoulder and slip your little arms about his neck, and go to sleep

like an angel whatever was happening around? I guess *so!* Well, that's me, too. Here I've been for two long year, never seeing nothing but wild animals or prowling savages till the last few months when a settler comes to them mountains seven mile to the southwest. Looked like I'd die, sometimes, just having myself to entertain."

"You lonesome, too?" said the girl, looking up incredulously. She drew a step nearer, a wistful light in her dark eyes.

The man stretched out his arms and dropped them to his side, heavily. "Like that," he cried — "just emptiness!"

"I stay," she said simply. "All time, want my own people; all time, Red Feather say some day take me to white people — want to go, all time. But Red Feather never tell me '*Big Hair.*' Didn't know what it was I was looking for — never thought it would be something like you."

"But you ain't afraid now, are you, little one?"

She shook her head, and drawing nearer, seated herself on the ground before the dugout. "You *look* Big Hair," she explained sedately, "but your speech is talk of weak squaw."

Somewhat disconcerted by these words, Willock sat down opposite her, and resumed his pipe as if

to assert his sex. "I seem weak to you," he explained, "because I love you, child, and want to make friends with you. But let me meet a big man — well, you'd see, then!" He looked so ferocious as he uttered these words, that she started up like a frightened quail, grasping her blanket about her.

"No, no, honey," he cooed abjectly, "I wouldn't hurt a fly. Me, I was always a byword amongst my pards. They'd say, 'There goes Brick Willock, what never harmed nobody.' When they kept me in at school I never clumb out the window, and it was me got all the prize cards at Sunday-school. How comes it, honey, that you ain't forgot to talk like civilized beings?"

"Red Feather, him always put me with squaw that know English — that been to school on the reservation. Never let me learn talk like the Indians. Him always say some day take me to my own people. But never said '*Big Hair.*'"

"Did he tell you your mother died two years ago?"

"Yes — father, him dead, too. Both died in the plains. Father was shot by robbers. Mother was left in big wagon — you bury her near this mountain."

"Oh, ho! So your father was killed at the same time your mother was, eh?"

"Yes."

"Well — all right. And now you got nobody but me to look after you — but you don't need no more; as long as I'm able to be up and about, nothing is going to hurt you. Just you tell me what you want, and it'll be did."

"Want to be *all* like white people; want to be just like mother."

"Well, I'll teach you as fur up as I've been myself. Your style of talk ain't correct, but it was the best Red Feather could do by you. Him and you lay down your words like stepping-stones for your thoughts to step over; but just listen at me, how smooth and fine-textured my language is, with no breaks or crevices from the beginning of my periods to where my voice steps down to start on a lower ledge. That's the way white people talks, not that they got more to say than Injuns, but they fills in, and embodies everything, like filling up cabin-walls with mud. I'll take you by the hand right from where Red Feather left you, and carry you up the heights."

She examined him dubiously: "You know how?"

"I ain't no bell-wether in the paths of learning, honey, but Red Feather is some miles behind me. What's your name?"

"Lahoma."

"Born that way, or Injunized?"

"Father before he died, him all time want to go settle in the Oklahoma country — settle on a claim with mother. They go there two times — three — but soldiers all time make them go back to Kansas. So me, I was born and they named me Oklahoma — but all time they call me Lahoma. That I must be called, Lahoma because that father and mother all time call me. Lahoma, that my name." She inquired anxiously, "You call me Lahoma?" She leaned forward, hands upon knees, in breathless anxiety.

"You bet your life I will, Lahoma!"

"Then me stay all time with you — *all* time. And you teach me talk right, and dress right, and be like mother and my white people? You teach me all that?"

"That's the program. I'm going to civilize you — that means to make you like white folks. It's going to take time, but the mountains is full of time."

"You 'civilize' me right now? — You begin to-

day?" She started up and stood erect with arms folded, evidently waiting for treatment.

"The process will be going on all the while you're associating with me, honey. That chief, Red Feather — he has a daughter, hasn't he?"

"No; him say no girl, no boy." She spoke with confidence.

"I see. And your father's dead too, eh?" Evidently Red Feather had thoroughly convinced her of the truth of these pretenses.

"Both — mother, father. Nobody but me." She knelt down at his side, her face troubled. "If I had just one!"

"Can you remember either of them?"

"Oh, yes, yes — and Red Feather, him talk about them, talk, talk, always say me be white with the white people some day. This is the day. You make me like mother was. You civilize me — begin!" She regarded him with dignified attention, her little hands locked about her blanket where it lay folded below her knees. The cloud had vanished from her face and her eyes sparkled with expectancy.

"I ain't got the tools yet, honey. They's no breaking up and enriching land that ain't never bore nothing but buffalo-grass, without I have picks and

spades and plows and harrers. I got to get my tools, to begin."

She stiffened herself. "You needn't be afraid I'll cry. I *want* you to hurt me, if that the way."

"It ain't like a pain in the stomach, Lahoma. All I gets for you will be some books. Them is the tools I'm going to operate with."

"Books? What are books?"

"Books?" Willock rubbed his bushy head in desperation. "Books? Why, they is just thoughts that somebody has ketched and put in a cage where they can't get away. You go and look at them thoughts somebody capable has give rise to, and when you finds them as has never ranged in your own brain, you captures 'em, puts your brand on 'em, and serves 'em out in your own herd. You see, Lahoma, what you think in your own brain ain't of no service, for *you* don't know nothing. If you want to be civilized, you got to lasso other people's thoughts — people as has went to and fro and has learned life — and you got to dehorn them ideas, and tame 'em."

Lahoma examined him with new interest. "Are *you* civilized?" Her countenance fell.

"Not to no wide extent, but I can ford toler'ble deep streams that would drown you, honey. Just

put confidence in me, and when I get over my head, I'll holler for help. I judge I can put five good years' work on you without exhausting my stores. I can read amongst the small words pretty peart — the young calves, so to say — and lots of them big steers in three or four syllables,— I can sort o' guess at their road-brands from the comp'ny I've saw 'em traveling with, in times past. And I can write my own name, and yours too, I reckon — Lahoma Gledware — yes, I'm toler'ble well versed on a capital 'G'— you just make a gap with a flying tail to it."

"My name *not* Lahoma Gledware," she interposed in some severity. "My name, Lahoma Willock. Beautiful name — lovely, like flower — Willock; call me Lahoma Willock — like song of little stream. Gledware, hard — rough."

Brick Willock stared at her in amazement. "Where'd you get that from?"

"My name Lahoma Willock — Red Feather tell me."

He smoked in silence, puffing rapidly. Then — "My name is Brick Willock. How came you to be named Lahoma Willock?"

Lahoma suggested thoughtfully —"All white people named Willock?"

"There's a few," Willock shook his head, "with less agreeable names. But after all, I'm glad you have my name. Yes — the more I think on it, the more pleased I get. I reckon we're sort of kin-folks, anyhow. Well, honey, this is enough talk about being civilized; now let's make the first move on the way. You want to see your mother's grave, and lay some of these wild flowers on it. That's a part of being civilized, caring for graves is. It's just savages as forgets the past and consequently never learns nothing. Come along. Them moccasins will do famous until I can get you shoes from the settlements. It's seventy mile to Vernon, Texas, and none too easy miles. But I got a pony the first time I ventured to Doan's store, and it'll carry you, if I have to walk at your side. We'll make a festibul march of that journey, and lay in clothes as a girl should wear, and books to last through the winter."

Willock rose and explained that they must cross the mountain. As they traversed it, he reminded her that she had not gathered any of the flowers that were scattered under sheltering boulders.

"Why?" asked Lahoma, showing that her neglect to do so was intentional.

"Well, honey, don't you love and honor that

mother that bore so much pain and trouble for you, traveling with you in her arms to the Oklahoma country, trying to make a home for you up there in the wilderness, and at last dying from the hardships of the plains. Ain't she worth a few flowers?"

"She dead. She not see flowers, not smell flowers, not know."

Willock said nothing, but the next time they came to a clump of blossoms he made a nosegay. Lahoma watched him with a face as calm and unemotional as that of Red Feather, himself. She held her back with the erect grace and moved her limbs with the swift ease of those among whom she had passed the last two years. In delightful harmony with this air of wildness was the rich and delicate beauty of her sun-browned face, and the golden glow of her silken brown hair. Willock's heart yearned toward her as only the heart of one destined to profound loneliness can yearn toward the exquisite grace and unconscious charm of a child; but to the degree that he felt this attraction, he held himself firmly aloof, knowing that wild animals are frightened when kindness beams without its veil.

"What you do with that?" She pointed at the flowers in his rough hand.

"Do you know anything about God?"

"I'm going to put 'em on your mother's grave."

"She not know. Not see, not smell. She dead, mother dead."

"Lahoma, do you know anything about God?"

"Yes — Great Spirit. God make my path white."

"Well, I want God to know that somebody remembers your mother. It's God that smells the flowers on the graves of the dead."

They walked on. Pretty soon Lahoma began looking about for flowers, but they had reached the last barren ledge, and no more came in sight.

"Take these, Lahoma."

"No. Couldn't fool God." They began the last descent. Willock suddenly discovered that tears were slipping down the girl's face. He said nothing; he did not fear, now, for he thought the tears promised a brighter dawning.

Suddenly Lahoma cried joyfully, "Oh, look, Brick, look!" And she darted toward the spot at the foot of a tall cedar, where purple and white blossoms showed in profusion. She gathered an armful, and they went down to the plain.

"Her head's toward the west," he said, as they stood beside the pile of stones. Lahoma placed the flowers at the western margin of the pyramid.

Willock laid his at the foot of the grave. The sun had set and the warmth of the heated sand was tempered by a fragrant breeze. Though late in October, he felt as if spring were just dawning. He took Lahoma's hand, and his heart throbbed to find that she showed no disposition to draw away.

He looked up with a great sigh of thanksgiving. "Well, God," he said softly, "here she is — You sure done it!"

CHAPTER VIII

GETTING CIVILIZED

DURING the two years passed by Brick Willock in dreary solitude, conditions about him had changed. The hardships of pioneer life which, fifty years ago, had obtained in the Middle States yet prevailed, in 1882, in the tract of land claimed by Texas under the name of Greer County; but the dangers of pioneer life were greatly lessened. As Lahoma made the acquaintance of the mountain-range, and explored the plain extending beyond the natural horseshoe, Willock believed she ran little danger from Indians. He, himself, had ceased to preserve his unrelaxing watchfulness; after all, it had been the highwaymen rather than the red men whom he had most feared — and after two years it did not seem likely that such volatile men would preserve the feeling of vengeance.

With the wisdom derived from his experience with wild natures, he carefully abstained from any attempt to force Lahoma's friendship, hence it was not long before he obtained it without reserve. As

she walked beside him, grave and alert, she no longer thought of his bushy beard and prodigious mop of harsh hair; and the daily exhibition of his strength caused him to grow handsome in her eyes because most of those feats were performed for her comfort or pleasure. In the meantime he talked incessantly, and to his admiration, he presently found her manner of speech wonderfully like his own, both fluent and ungrammatical.

He knew nothing of grammar, to be sure, but there were times when his mistakes, echoed from her lips, struck upon his ear, and though he might not always know how to correct them, he was prompt to suggest changes, testing each, as a natural musician judges music, by ear. Dissatisfied with his own standards, he was all the more impatient to depart on the expedition after mental tools, despite the dangers that might beset the journey.

His first task prompted by the coming of Lahoma, had been to partition off the half of the dugout containing the stove for the child's private chamber. Cedar posts set in the ground and plastered with mud higher than his head, left a space between the top and the apex of the ceiling that the temperature might be equalized in both rooms. Thus far, however, they did not stay in the dugout except long

enough to eat and sleep, for the autumn had continued delightful, and the cove seemed to the child her home, of which the dugout was a sort of cellar. Concerning the stone retreat in the crevice she knew nothing. Willock did not know why he kept the secret, since he trusted Lahoma with all his treasures, but the unreasoning reticence of the man of great loneliness still rested on him. Some day, he would tell — but not just yet.

"Lahoma," he said one day, "there's a settler over yonder in the mountains across the south plain. How'd you like to pay him a visit?"

"I don't want anybody but you," said Lahoma promptly.

Willock stood on one leg, rubbing the other meditatively with his delighted foot. Not the quiver of a muscle, however, revealed the fact that her words had flooded his heart with sunshine. "Well, honey, that's in reason. But I've got to take you with me after books and winter supplies, and I don't like the idea of traveling alone. It come to me that I might get Mr. Settler to go, too. Time was not so long ago when Injun bands was coming and going, and although old Greer is beginning to be sprinkled up with settlers, here and there, I can't get over the feel of the old times. They ain't no sensa-

tion as sticks by a man when he's come to be wedged in between forty-five and fifty, as the feel of the old times."

"Well," said Lahoma earnestly, "I wish you'd leave me here when you go after them books. I don't want to be with no strangers, I want to just squat right here and bear myself company."

"That's in reason. But, honey, while you might be safe enough whilst bearing the same, I would be plumb crazy worrying about you. I might not have good cause for worrying, but worrying — it ain't no bird that spreads its wings and goes north when cold weather comes; worrying — it's independent of causes and seasons."

"If you have got to be stayed with to keep you from worrying, they ain't nothing more to be said."

"Just so. That there old settler, I have crossed a few words with him, and I believe he would do noble to travel with. He's as gruff and growly as a grizzly bear if you say a word to him, and if he'll just turn all that temper he's vented on me on to any strangers we may run up against on the trail, he'll do invaluable."

"I'll go catch up the pony," said Lahoma briefly, "for I see the thing is to be did. This will be the

first visit I ever made in my life when I wasn't drug by the Injuns."

"You mustn't say 'drug,' honey, unless specifying medicines and herbs. I ain't saying you didn't get it from me, and knowing you do get from me all I got, is what makes me hone for them books. You must say 'dragged.' The Injuns *dragged* you from one village to another." He paused meditatively, muttering the word to himself, while Lahoma ran away to catch the pony. When she came back, leading it by the mane, he said, "I've been a-weighing that word, Lahoma, and it don't seem to me that 'dragged' sounds proper. It don't seem no sort of word to use in a parlor. What do you think? *Dragged!* How does that strike you?"

"I don't like the sound of it, neither," said Lahoma, shaking her head. "I think *drug* is softer. It kinder melts in the ear, and *dragged* sticks."

"Well, don't use neither one till I can find out." Presently he was swinging along across the plain toward the southwestern range while the girl kept close beside him on the pony. Their talk was incessant, voicing the soul of good comradeship, and but for the difference between heavy bass and fluty soprano, a listener might have supposed himself

overhearing a conversation between two Brick Willocks.

There was nothing about the second range of the Wichita Mountains to distinguish it from the one farthest toward the northeast except a precipice at its extremity, rising a sheer three or four hundred feet above the level plain. Beyond this lofty termination, the mountain curved inward, leaving a wide grassy cove open toward the south; and within this half-circle was the settler's dugout.

The unprotected aspect of that little home was in itself an eloquent commentary on the wonderful changes that had come about during the last seventeen years. The oval tract of one million five hundred thousand acres lying between Red River and its fork, named Greer County, and claimed by Texas, was in miniature a reproduction of the early history of America. Until 1860 it had not even borne a name, and since then it had possessed no settled abodes. Here bands of Indians of various tribes had come and gone at will, and here the Indians of the Plains, after horrible deeds of depredation, massacre and reprisal, had found shelter among its mountains. The country lay at the southwest corner of Indian Territory for which the Indians had exchanged their lands in other parts of the United

States on the guarantee that the government would "forever secure to them and their heirs the country so exchanged with them."

At the close of the Civil War the unhappy Indians long continued in a state of smoldering animosity, or warlike activity, tribe against tribe, band against band; they had inherited the rancor and bitterness of the White Man's war with neither the fruits of victory nor the dignity that attends honorable defeat. The reservations that belonged originally to the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Seminole and Creek tribes, were reduced in area to make room for new tribes from Kansas, Colorado and other states, and the Indian wars resulted. For a time the scalp-knife was crimsoned, the stake was charred, bands stole in single file over mountains and among half-dried streams; troups of the regular army were assaulted by invisible foes, and forts were threatened. Youths who read romances of a hundred years ago dealing with the sudden war-cry, the flaming cabin, the stealthy approach of swarming savages, need have traveled only a few hundred miles to witness on the open page of life what seemed to them, in their long-settled states, fables of a dead past.

But though the Indian wars in the Territory had

been bloody and vindictive, they had not been protracted as in the old days. Around the country of the red man was drawn closer and more securely, day by day, the girdle of civilization. Within its constricting grasp the spirit of savagery, if not crushed, was at least subdued. Tribes naked but for their blankets, unadorned save by the tattoo, found themselves pressed close to other tribes which, already civilized, had relinquished the chase for agricultural pursuits. Primeval men, breathing this quickened atmosphere of modernity, either grew more sophisticated, or perished like wild flowers brought too near the heat. It is true the plains were still unoccupied, but they had been captured — for the railroad had come, and the buffalo had vanished

Brick Willock and the man he had come to see were very good types of the first settlers of the new country — one a highwayman, hiding from his kind, the other a trapper by occupation, trying to keep ahead of the pursuing waves of immigration. It was the first time Lahoma had seen Bill Atkins, and as she caught sight of him before his dugout, her eyes brightened with interest. He was a tall lank man of about sixty-five, with a huge gray mustache and bushy hair of iron-gray, but without a beard. The mustache gave him an effect of

exceeding fierceness, and the deeply wrinkled forehead and square chin added their testimony to his ungracious disposition.

But Lahoma was not afraid of coyotes, catamounts or mountain-lions, and she was not afraid of Bill Atkins. Her eyes brightened at the discovery that he held in his hand that which Willock had described to her as a book.

"Does he read?" she asked Willock, breathlessly. "Does he read, Brick?"

Willock surveyed the seated figure gravely. "He reads!" he responded.

The man looked up, saw Willock and bent over his book — discovered Lahoma on the pony, and looked up again, unwillingly but definitely. "You never told me you had a little girl," he remarked gruffly.

"You never asked me," said Willock. "Get down, Lahoma, and make yourself at home."

The man shut his book. "What are you going to do?"

"Going to visit you. Turn the pony loose, Lahoma; he won't go far."

"Haven't you got all that north range to yourself?" Bill Atkins asked begrudgingly.

"Yap. How're you making it, Atkins?"

"Why, as long as I'm let alone, I'm making it all right. It's being let alone that I can't ever accomplish. When I was a boy I began my travels to keep out where I could breathe, and I've been crowded out of Missouri and Kansas and Colorado and Wyoming and California, and now I've come to the American Desert thinking I could die in peace, but oh, no, not *me!* I no sooner get settled and make my turf dugout, than here comes a stranger —"

"Name of Brick Willock, if you've forgot," interpolated Willock genially. "I'll just light my pipe, as I reckon there's no objections. Lahoma don't care, and you can breathe all right if you keep with the wind from you."

The man turned his back upon Willock, opened his book and read.

Lahoma approached the block of wood that supported him, while Willock calmly stretched himself out on the grass. "Is that a book?" she asked, by way of opening up the conversation.

The man gripped it tighter and moved his lips busily. As she remained at his knee, he presently said, "Oh, no, it's a hand-organ!"

Lahoma smiled pityingly. "Are you afraid of me, Atkins?"

The man looked up with open mouth. "Not exactly, kid!" There was something in her face that made him lose interest in his book. He kept looking at her.

"Then why don't you tell the truth? *We* won't hurt you."

The man opened his mouth and closed it. Then he said, "It's a book."

"Did you ever read it before?"

"This is the third time I've read it."

"Seems as it hasn't accomplished no good on you, as you still tell lies."

The man rose abruptly, and laid the book on the seat. His manner was quite as discouraging as it had been from the start.

"Honey," interposed Willock, "that ain't to say a lie, not a real lie."

"*Is* it a hand-organ?" Lahoma demanded sternly.

"In a manner of speaking, honey, it is a hand-organ in the sense of shutting you off from asking questions. You learn to distinguish the sauces of speech as you gets older. Out in the big world, people don't say this or that according as it *is*, they steeps their words in a sauce as suits the digestion. Don't be so quick to call '*lies!*' till you

learns the flavor of a fellow's meaning, not by his words but by the sauce he steeps 'em in."

"Don't get mad at me," said Lahoma to the trapper. "I don't know nothing, never having captured and branded the thoughts that is caged up in books. But I want to be civilized and I am investigating according."

The trapper, somewhat conciliated, reseated himself. He regarded the girl with greater interest, not without a certain approval. "How comes it that you aren't civilized, living with such a knowing specimen as your own father?"

"My father's dead. Brick is my cousin, but I not knowing nothing of him till he saved my life two years ago and after that, me with the Indians and him all alone. Would you like to hear about it?"

"I wouldn't bother him, honey, with all that long story," interposed Willock, suddenly grown restive.

"Yes, tell me," said the trapper, moving over that she might find room on the block of wood beside him.

Lahoma seated herself eagerly and looking up into the other's face, which softened more and more under her fearless gaze, she said:

"We was crossing the plains — father, mother and

me, in a big wagon. And men dressed up like Indians, they come whooping and shooting, and father turns around and drives with all his might — drives clear to yonder mountain. And mother dies, being that sick before, and the jolting too much for her. So father takes me on his horse and rides all night, and I all asleep. Well, those same men dressed like Indians, they was in a cabin 'way up north, and had put their wigs and feathers off and was gambling over what they stole from the other wagons. So father, he sees the light from the window and rides up with me. And they takes him for a spy and says they, in a voice awful fierce, just this way— *'Kill 'em both!'* "

The trapper gave a start at the explosiveness of her tone.

Lahoma shouted again, as harshly as she could, "'Kill 'em both,' says they." Then she turned to Willock. "Did I put them words in the correct sauce, Brick?"

"You done noble, honey."

Lahoma resumed: "Now it was in a manner of happening that Brick, he was riding around to have a look at the country, and when he rides up to the cabin, why, right outside there was me and father, and two of the robbers about to kill us. 'What are

you devils up to?' says Brick. 'You go to hell,' says the leading man, 'that's where we're going to send this spy and his little girl,' says he; 'you go to hell and maybe you'll meet 'em there,' he says. And with that he ups and shoots at Brick, the bullet lifting his hat right off his head and scaring the horse out from under him, so he falls right there at the feet of them two robber-men, on his back. Brick, he never harmed nobody before in his life, but what was he to do? He might of let them kill him, but that would of left father and me in their grip, so he just grabs the gun out of the leading man's hand, as he hadn't ever carried a gun in his life his own self, and he shot both them robbers, him still laying there on his back —"

"No, honey, I got up about that time."

"Brick, you told me you was still laying there on your back just as you fell."

"Did I, honey, well, I reckon I was, then, for when I told you about it, it was more recent."

"It's awful interesting," the trapper remarked dryly.

"Yes, ain't it!" Lahoma glowed. "Then father jumped on one horse with me, and Brick put out on another, and when I woke up, the Indians were all everywhere, but Brick come here and lived all

alone and nearly died because he didn't have me to comfort him. So the Indians took me and they killed father, and for two years I was moved from village to village till Red Feather brought me to Brick. And then we found out we are cousins and he is going to civilize me. Brick, he remembers about a cousin of his, Cousin Martha Willock, her sister went driving out to the Oklahoma country with her husband and little girl and wasn't never heard of. I am the little girl, all right, and Brick he's my second cousin. And wasn't it lucky Brick was riding around that night, looking at the country, when they was about to put daylight into me?"

"I'd think," remarked the trapper, "that he'd take you back to your Cousin Martha, for men-folks like him and me aren't placed to take care of women-folks."

"Yes, but he got a letter saying my Cousin Martha and all her family is done been swept away by a flood of the Mississippi River, and him and me is all they is left of the Willockses, so we *got* to stick together. Besides, you see, he killed them two robbers, and the rest of the gang is laying for him; Brick, he feels so dreadful, he never having so much as put a scratch to a man's face before, for he wouldn't never fight as a boy, his conscience wouldn't

rest if he was in civilization. He'd go right up to the first policeman he met and say, 'I done the deed. Carry me to the pen!' he'd say, and then what would become of me?"

"He might get another letter from your Cousin Martha to help him out of the scrape."

Lahoma stared at him, unable to grasp the significance of these foolish words, and Brick, seeking a diversion, explained his purpose of taking Lahoma to the settlements after supplies, and proffered his petition that Bill Atkins accompany them.

Lahoma has never forgotten that expedition to the settlements. Along the Chisholm Trail marched Brick Willock and Bill Atkins, one full of genial philosophy, responsive to every sight and sound along the way, the other taciturn and uncompanionable, a being present in the flesh, but seemingly absent in the spirit. Behind them rode the girl, with unceasing interest in the broad hard-beaten trail — the only mark in that wilderness to tell them that others had passed that way. The men walked with deliberate but well-measured step, preserving a pace that carried them mile after mile seemingly with little weariness. Three times on the journey great herds of cattle were encountered on their way toward Kansas, and many were the looks of curi-

osity cast on the little girl sitting as straight as an Indian on her pony.

She was glad when a swinging cloud of dust announced the coming of thousands of steers, attended by cowboys, for it meant a glimpse into an unknown world, and the bellowing of cattle, the shouting of men and the cracking of whips stirred her blood. But she was glad, too, when the stream of life had flowed past, and she was left alone with Brick and Bill, for then the never-ending conversation with the former was resumed, picked up at the point where it had been dropped, or drawn forward from raveled bits of unfinished discourse of the day before, and though Bill Atkins said almost nothing and always looked straight ahead, he was, in a way, spice in the feast of her enjoyment.

When they stopped for their meals, they drew aside from the trail, if possible near some spring or river-bed in which pools of water lingered, but such stopping-places were far apart in the desert country. At night there was a cheerful bonfire, followed by zestful talk as they lay on the ground,— before falling asleep in their tarpaulins — talk eagerly monopolized by Brick and Lahoma, and to which Atkins seemed in a manner to listen, perhaps warming his heart at the light of their comrade-

ship even as they warmed their hands in the early morning at the breakfast fire. Atkins had brought with him one of his books, and at the noon hour's rest, and at evening beside the bonfire, he kept his nose buried in its pages.

Lahoma did not think life would have been too long to devote to such pilgrimages. In the settlements, she was bewildered, but never satiated, with novelties, and on the way back, everything she had seen was discussed, expounded and classified between her and her "cousin." Sometimes her questions drove Brick up against a stone wall and then Bill Atkins would raise his voice and in three or four words put the matter in its true light.

"Bill, he's saw more of life than me," Brick conceded admiringly. "He has come and went amongst all sorts of people, but my specialty has in the main been low."

"Yes, I've seen more of life," Atkins agreed; "that's why I try so hard to keep away from it."

"The more I see, the more I want to see!" cried Lahoma eagerly.

"Yes, honey," Brick explained, "that's because you're a *woman*."

Once more back in the cove, Lahoma dreamed new dreams, peopling the grassy solitude with the

figures she had encountered on her travels, likening the rocks to various houses that had caught her fancy. She turned with absorbed interest to the primer and elementary arithmetic with which Brick had supplied himself as the first tools for his mental kit.

The journey back home had been far easier than the descent into Texas because both Willock and Atkins had supplied themselves with ponies,— animals that sold ridiculously cheap at the outlying posts of the settlements. Brick Willock brought back with him something else to add cheerfulness and usefulness to approaching winter. This was a square window-sash, set with four small panes of good glass. It was hard work to place this window in Lahoma's side of the dugout, but it was work thoroughly enjoyed. Lahoma's room was on the west, and from noon to sundown, the advantage of the window was a source of never-ending delight.

"Good thing we've got our window," Brick would say as they sat on the low rude bench before the little stove, and the furious wind of January howled overhead. Or, when the wintry sky was leaden and all Brick's side of the partition was as dark as the hole of a prairie-dog, he would visit

Lahoma, and gloat over the dim gray light stealing through the small panes. "That window's no bad idea!" he would chuckle, stooping his great bulk cautiously as he seated himself, as if to lighten his weight by doubling in upon himself.

"Good thing I've got my window," Lahoma would say as the snow lay thick on the plains and in broken lines all over the mountain, and the cutting blast made the fire jump with sudden fright. She would hold her book close to the dirt square in which the frame was planted, and spell out words she had never heard used, such as "lad," "lass," "sport," and the like mysteries. "This window is going to civilize me, Brick."

It did not lessen their relish in the subject that they had discussed it already a hundred times. It was the same way with the hand-made bench, with the trench that carried water from their door during sudden downpours, and with the self-congratulation over owning two ponies to keep each other company.

"They's one thing about us, Lahoma, which it ain't according to the big outside world, and yet I hope it won't never be changed. We are mighty glad we've got what we've got. And to be glad of what you've got is a sure way to multiply your

property. Every time you brag on that window, it shines like two windows to me."

Spring came late that year, and in the early days of March, Brick rode over to the cove behind the precipice after Bill Atkins. "I want you to come over to my place," he begged, "and answer some of Lahoma's questions. Being closeted with her in that there dugout all winter, she has pumped me as dry as a bone."

Perhaps Bill Atkins had had his fill of solitude during that cold winter — or perhaps he was hungry for another hour of the little girl's company. Nothing, however, showed his satisfaction as he entered her chamber. "Here I am," he announced, seating himself on the bench. This was his only greeting.

"Is it drug or dragged?" demanded Lahoma.

"Dragged."

"Why don't God send me a little girl to play with, after me asking for one every night, all winter?"

"Don't understand God's business," replied Atkins briefly.

"I puts it this way," Brick spoke up; "God's done sent one little girl, and it ain't right to crowd Him too far."

"Will I be all they is of me, as long as I live?"

"Nobody won't never come to live in these plains," Brick declared, "unless its trappers and characters like us. But we'll stay by you, won't we, Bill Atkins?"

Atkins looked exceedingly gruff and shook his head as if he had his doubts about it. "You'll have to be taken to the States," he declared.

"But what would become of Brick?"

"Well, honey," said Brick, "you want to take your place with people in the big world, don't you?"

"Oh, *yes!*" cried Lahoma, starting up and stretching her arm toward the window. "In the big world — yes! That's the place for me — that's where I want to live. But what will become of you?"

"Well," Brick answered slowly, "the rock pile, t'other side the mountain is good enough for me. Your mother sleeps under it."

"Oh, Brick!" She caught his arm. "You wouldn't die if I went away, would you?"

"Why, you see, honey, they wouldn't be nothing left to go on. I'd just sort of stop, you know — but it wouldn't matter — out there in the big world, people don't remember very long, and when you're grown you wouldn't know there'd ever been a cove

with a dugout in it, and a window in the wall, and a Brick Willock to carry in the wood for the fire."

"I'll always remember — and I won't go without you. He *could* go with me, couldn't he, Bill?"

"I suspicion he has his reasons for not," Atkins observed gravely.

"I has, and I shall never go back to the States."

"Then what's the use civilizing me?" demanded Lahoma mournfully.

"I want you to enjoy yourself. And when I'm old and no-'count, you'd need somebody to take care of you — and you'd go full-equipped and ready to stand up to any civilized person that tried to run a bluff on you."

"But, oh, I want to *go* — I want to go out *there* — where there ain't no plains and alkali and buffalo-grass — where they's pavements and policemen and people in beautiful clothes. I don't mean *now,* I mean when I have got civilized." She drew herself up proudly. "I wouldn't go till I was civilized, till I was like them." She turned impulsively to Brick: "But you've got to go with me when I go! I'm going to stay with you till I'm fit to go, and then you're going to stay with me the rest of my life."

"Am I fit to go with her?" Brick appealed to Bill Atkins.

"You ain't," Bill replied.

"I ain't fit," Brick declared firmly. "I'm a-going to fitten you; but it's too late to work on me; and besides, if they *was* time enough, it ain't to the grain of my nature. I knows all I wants to know, which if little or much is enough for me. And I wouldn't be fit to go with you out into the big world and cut a figger in it, which couldn't be no figger but a figger naught. And Atkins who knows more than me, he says the same."

The tears were in Lahoma's eyes. She looked from one to the other, her little face deeply troubled. Suddenly she grabbed up her books and started toward the stove. "Then this here civilizing is going to stop," she declared.

"Lahoma!" Brick cried in dismay.

"Yes, it is — unless you promise to stay with me when I go to live in the big world."

"Honey, I'll promise you this: When you are ready to live out there, I'll sure go with you and stay with you — if you want me, when the time comes."

Lahoma seized his hand, and jumped up and down in delight.

"It's a safe promise," remarked Bill Atkins dryly

CHAPTER IX

A YOUNG MAN'S FANCY

ONE evening in May, a tall lithe figure crept along the southern base of the mountain range, following its curves with cautious feet as if fearful of discovery. He was a young man of twenty-one or two, bronzed, free of movement, agile of step. His face was firm, handsome and open, although at present a wish to escape observation caused the hazel eyes to dart here and there restlessly, while the mouth tightened in an aspect of sternness. This air of wild resolution was heightened by the cowboy's ordinary garments, and the cowboy's indispensable belt well-stocked with weapons.

On reaching the spur that formed the western jaw of the horseshoe, he crept on hands and knees, but satisfied by searching glances that the inner expanse was deserted, he half rose and stole shadow-like along the granite wall, until he had reached the hill-island that concealed the cove. Again falling on hands and knees, he drew himself slowly up among the huge flat rocks that covered the hill in all di-

rections. In a brief time he had traversed it, and a view of the cove was suddenly unrolled below. A few yards from Brick Willock's dugout, now stood a neat log cabin, and not far from the door of this cabin was a girl of about fifteen, seated on the grass.

She had been reading, but her book had slipped to her feet. With hands clasped about her knee, and head tilted back, she was watching the lazy white clouds that stretched like wisps of scattered cotton across the blue field of the sky. At first the young man was startled by the impression that she had discovered his presence and was scrutinizing his position, but a second glance reassured him, and he stretched himself where a block of granite and, below it, a cedar tree, effectually protected him from discovery. Thus hidden, he stared at the girl unblinkingly.

He was like a thirsty traveler drinking at a cool well unexpectedly discovered in a desert country. For two years he had led the life of the cowboy, exiled from his kind, going with the boys from lower Texas to Kansas along the Chisholm Trail, overseeing great herds of cattle, caring for them day and night, scarcely ever under a roof, even that of a dugout. Through rain and storm, the ground had

been his bed, and many a blistering summer day a pony captured wild from the plains, and broken to stand like a dog, had been his only shade. During these two years of hard life, reckless companions and exacting duties, he had easily slipped into the grooves of speech and thought common to his fellows. Only his face, his unconscious movements and accents, distinguished him from the other boys of "Old Man Walker"— the boss of the "G-Bar Outfit." On no other condition but that of apparent assimilation could he have retained his place with Walker's ranchmen; and in his efforts to remove as quickly as possible the reproach of tenderfoot it was not his fault that he had retained the features of a different world, or that a certain air, not of the desert, was always breaking through the crust under which he would have kept his real self out of sight. He himself was the least conscious that this was so.

For two years he had seen no one like the girl of the cove, none — though he had seen women and girls of the settlements, often enough — who even suggested her kind. Her dress, indeed, was plain enough, and obviously chosen in cheerful ignorance of forms and conventions, though the color, a delicate pink, was all he could have wished. After all,

the clothes revealed nothing except absence from city shops and city standards.

That was wonderful hair, its brown tresses gleaming though untouched by the sun, as if in it were enmeshed innumerable particles of light. It seemed to glow from its very fineness, its silkiness — the kind of hair one is prompted to touch, to feel if it is really that way! The face was more wonderful, because it told many things that can not be expressed in mere hair-language. There was the seal of innocence on the lips, the proof of fearlessness in the eyes, the touch of thought on the brow, the sign of purpose about the resolute little chin. The slender brown hands spoke of life in the open air, and the glow of the cheeks told of burning suns. Her form, her attitude, spoke not only of instinctive grace, but of a certain wildness in admirable harmony with the surrounding scene. Somehow, the ruggedness of the mountains and the desolate solitudes of the plains were reflected from her face.

The young man gazed as if his thirst would never be appeased. The flavor of nights about the campfire and other nights spent in driving sleet, also days when the first flowers come and the wide beds of the desert rivers are swollen with overbrimming floods; the cruel exposure of winter, the thrilling

balminess of early spring — all spoke to him again from that motionless figure. He recalled companions of his boyhood and youth, but they were not akin to this child of the desert mountains. Still more alien were those of the saloon stations, the haunts at the outskirts of civilization. It seemed to him that in this young girl, who had the look and poise of a woman, he had found what hitherto he had vainly sought in the wilderness — the beauty and the charm of it, refined and separated from its sordidness and its uncouthness — in a word, from all that was base and ugly. It was for this that he had left his home in the East. Here was typified that loveliness of the unbroken wilderness without its profanity, its drunkenness, its obscenity, its terrible hardships.

At last he tore himself away, retraced his steps as cautiously as he had come, and flung himself upon the pony left waiting at a sheltered nook far from the cove. As he sped over the plains toward the distant herd, it came to him suddenly in a way not before experienced, that it was May, that the air was balmy and fragrant, and that the land, softly lighted in the clear twilight, was singularly beautiful. He seemed breathing the roses back home — which recalled another face, but not for

long. The last time he had seen that eastern face, the dew had lain on the early morning roses — how could a face so different make him think of them? But imagination is sometimes a bold robber, and now it did not hesitate to steal those memories of sweet scents to encloud the picture of the mountain-girl.

The G-Bar headquarters was on the western bank of what was then known as Red River, but was really the North Fork of Red River. "Old Man Walker," who was scarcely past middle age, had built his corral on the margin of the plain which extended to that point in an unbroken level from a great distance, and which, having reached that point, dropped without warning, a sheer precipice, to an extensive lake. The lake was fed by springs issuing from the bluffs; not far beyond it and not much lower, was the bed of the river, wide, very red and almost dry. Beyond the river rose the bold hills of the Kiowa country, a white line chiseled across the face of each, as if Time had entertained some thought of their destruction, but finding each a huge block of living rock, had passed on to torture and shift and alter the bed of the river.

The young man reached the corral after a ride of twelve or thirteen miles, most of the distance through

a country of difficult sand. He galloped up to the rude enclosure, surrounded by a cloud of dust through which his keen gray eyes discovered Mizzoo on the eve of leaving camp. Mizzoo was one of the men whose duty it was to ride the line all night — the line that the young man had guarded all day — to keep Walker's cattle from drifting.

"Come on, Mizz," called the young man, as the other swung upon his broncho, "I'm going back with you."

The lean, leather-skinned, sandy-mustached cattleman uttered words not meet for print, but expressive of hearty pleasure. "Ain't you had enough of it, Bill?" he added. "I'd think you'd want to lay up for to-morrow's work."

"Oh, I ain't sleepy," the young man declared, as they rode away side by side. "I couldn't close an eye to-night — and I want to talk."

The cattleman chuckled enjoyingly. It was lonely and monotonous work, riding back and forth through the darkness, keeping a sharp lookout for wolves or Indians, driving straggling cattle back to the herd, in brief, doing the picket duty of the plains.

Mizzoo was so called from his habit of attributing his most emphatic aphorisms to "his aunt, Miss

Sue of Missouri"— a lady held by his companions to be a purely fictitious character, a convenient "Mrs. Harris" to give weight to sayings worn smooth from centuries of use.

Of all the boys of the ranch, Mizzoo found Wilfred Compton most companionable. When off duty, they were usually to be found near each other, whether awake or asleep; and when Mizzoo, on entering some village at the edge of the desert, sought relaxation from a life of routine by shooting through the windows and spurring his pony into the saloons, it was the young man, commonly known as Bill, who lingered behind to advance money for damages to the windows, or who kept close to the drunken ranger in order to repair the damages Mizzoo had done to his own soul and body.

"I'll talk my head off," Mizzoo declared, "if that'll keep you on the move with me, for it's one thing meeting a ghost in the desert all alone, and quite another when there's a pair of us. Yes, I know you don't believe nothing I say about that spirit, and I only hope we'll come on it to-night! It ain't been a week since I see something creeping along behind me whilst I was riding the line, a little thing as swift as a jack-rabbit and as sly as a coyote

— something with long arms and short legs and the face of an Injun —"

"Of course it *was* an Indian," returned the young man carelessly. "He is hanging about here to steal some of our horses. I don't want you to talk about your ghost, I've heard of him a thousand times."

"Bill, the more you talk about a ghost, the more impressive he gets. I tell you that wasn't no live Injun! Didn't I blaze away at him with my six-shooter and empty all my barrels for nothing? No, sir, it's the same spirit that haunts the trail from Vernon, Texas, to Coffeyville. I've shot at that red devil this side of Fort Sill, and at Skeleton Spring, and at Bull Foot Spring, and a mile from Doan's store — always at night, for it never rises except at night, as befits a good ghost. I reckon I'll waste cartridges on that spook as long as I hit the trail, but I don't never expect to draw blood. Others has saw him, too, but me more especial. I reckon I'm the biggest sinner of the G-Bar and has to be plagued most frequent with visitations to make me a better man when I get to be old."

"He's a knowing old ghost if he's found you out, Mizzoo, but if you want my company, to-night, you'll drop the Indian. What I want you

to talk about is that little girl you met on the trail down in Texas, seven years ago."

Mizzoo burst out in a hearty laugh. "I reckon it suits you better to take her as a little kid," he cried, his tall form shaking convulsively. "I'll never forget how you looked, Bill, when we tried to run a bluff on her daddy last month!"

The other did not answer with a smile. Apparently the reminiscence pleased him less than it did the older man. He spurred his horse impatiently, and it plunged forward through the drifted banks of white sand.

Mizzoo hastened to overtake him, still chuckling. "Old Man Walker never knowed what a proposition he was handing us when he ordered us to drive the old mountain-lion out of his lair! Looks like the six of us ought to have done the trick. Them other fellows looked as wild as bears, and you was just like a United States soldier marching on a Mexican strongholt, not stopping at nothing, and it ain't for me to say how brave *I* done. Pity you and me was at the tail-end of the attacking party. Fust thing we knowed, them other four galoots was falling backwards a-getting out of that trap of a cove, and the bullets was whizzing about our ears —"

He broke off to shout with laughter. "And it

was all done by one old settler and his gal, them standing out open and free with their breech-loaders, and us hiking out for camp like whipped curs!"

The young man was impatient, but he compelled himself to speak calmly. "As I never got around the spur of the mountain before you fellows were in full retreat, I object to being classed with the whipped curs, and you'll bear that in mind, M'izzoo. You saw the girl all right, didn't you?"

"You bet I did, and as soon as I see her, I knowed it was the same I'd came across on the trail, seven year ago. I'd have knowed it from her daddy, of course, but there wasn't no mistaking *her*. Her daddy give it to us plain that if he ever catched one of us inside his cove he'd kill us like so many coyotes, and I reckon he would. Well, he's got as much right to his claim as anybody else — this land don't belong to nobody, and there he's been a-squatting considerable longer than we've laid out this ranch. He was in the right of it, but what I admire was his being able to hold his rights. Lots of folks has rights but they ain't man enough to hold 'em. And if you could have seen that gal, her eyes like two big burning suns, and her mouth closed like a steel-trap, and her hand as steady on that trigger as the

mountain rock behind her! Lord, Bill! what a trembly, knock-kneed, meaching sort of a husband she's a-going to fashion to her hand, one of these days! But *pretty?* None more so. And a-going all to waste out here in the desert!"

They rode on for some time in silence, save for the intermittent chuckling of the cattleman as visions of his companions' pale faces and scurrying forms rose before his mind.

"And now about that child, seven years ago," the young man said, when the last hoarse sound of mirth had died away.

"Why, yes, me and the boys was bringing about two thousand head up to Abiline when we come on to this same pardner and another man walking the trail, with a little gal coming behind 'em on her pony. And it was this same gal. I reckon she was seven or eight year old, then. Well, sir, I just thought as I looked at her, that I never seen a prettier sight in this world and I reckon I ain't, for when I looked at the same gal the other day, the gun she was holding up to her eye sort of dazzled me so I couldn't take stock of all her good points. But seeing that little gal out there in the plains — it was like hearing an old-fashioned hymn at the country meeting-house and knowing a big

basket dinner was to follow. I can't express it more deep than that. We went into camp that evening, and all of us got pretty soft and mellow, what from the unusualness of the meeting, and we asked the old codger if we could all come over to his camp and shake hands with the gal — he'd drawed back from us about a mile, he was that skeered to be sociable. So after considerable haggling and jawing, he said we could, and here we come, just about sundown, all of us looking sheepish enough to be carved for mutton, but everlasting determined to take that gal by the paw."

"Well?" said the young man who had often heard this story, but had never been treated to the sequel, "what happened then, Mizzoo? You always stop at the same place. Didn't you shake hands with her?"

The other ruminated in deep silence for some time, then rejoined, "I don't know how it is — a fellow can talk about the worst devilment in creation with a free rein, and no words hot enough to blister his tongue, but let him run up against something simple like that, and the bottom of his lungs seems to fall out. I guess they ain't no more to be told. That was all there was to it, though I might add that the next day we come along by old Whisky

Simeon's joint that sets out on the sand-hills, you know, and we put spurs to our bronks and went whooping by, with old Whisky Sim a-staring and a-hollering after us like he thought we was crazy. I don't know as I had missed a drunk before for five year, when the materials was ready-found for its making. And I ain't never forgot the little kid with the brown hair and the eyes that seen to your bottom layer, like a water-witch a-penetrating the ground with a glance, seeing through dirt and clay and rocks to what water they is."

Mizzoo relapsed into meditative silence, and the young man, in sympathy with his mood, kept at his side, no longer asking questions. Darkness came on and the hour grew late but few words were exchanged as they rode the weary miles that marked the limit of the range. There were the usual incidents of such work, each bringing its customary comments. The midnight luncheon beside a small fire, over which the coffee steamed, roused something like cheerful conversation which, however, flickered and flared uncertainly like the bonfire. On the whole the young man was unwontedly reserved, and the other, perceiving it, fell back contentedly on his own resources — pleasant memories and rank tobacco.

"Guess I'll leave you now," remarked the young man, when the fire had died away.

"Yes, better turn in, for you're most uncommon dull you know," Mizzoo replied frankly. "'Twould be just about as much company for me if you'd hike out and leave me your picture to carry along."

Instead of taking the direction toward the river, the young man set out at a gallop for the distant mountain range which, in the gloom, seemed not far away. After an hour's hard riding, he reached it. His impatience had made that hour seem almost interminable, yet it had not been long enough to furnish him with any clear reason for having come. If, as Mizzoo had declared, he needed sleep, he would surely not think of finding it near the cove from which his companions had been warned under penalty of death. If drawn by longing for another glimpse of the girl of the cove he could not expect to see her an hour or two after midnight. Yet here he was, attracted, and still urged on, by impulses he did not attempt to resist.

CHAPTER X

THE FLAG OF TRUCE

EARLIEST dawn found the young man seated composedly upon one of the flattened outcroppings of the hill of stone that lay like an island between the outer plain and the sheltered cove. As yet, there was no sign of life within the cove — both the dugout and the cabin of cedar logs were as silent and as void of movement as the rocks behind them. The young man watched first one, then the other, as tireless and vigilant as if he had not been awake for twenty-four hours.

It was the dugout that first started from its night's repose. Before the sun showed itself over the rim of the prairie, long before its rays darted over the distant mountain-crest, the door was thrown away from the casing, and a great uncouth man, strong as a giant, and wild of aspect as a savage, strode forth, gun in hand, his eyes sweeping the landscape in quick flashing glances. Almost instantly he discovered the figure perched on the granite block over-

looking his retreat. He raised his gun to his shoulder.

The young man fell sidewise behind the rocks and a bullet clipped the edge of his barricade. Remaining supine, he fastened his handkerchief to the end of his whip and waved it above the rampart. Having thus manifested his peaceful intent, he rose, still holding the flag of truce above his head, and remained motionless. Brick Willock stared at him for a moment in hostile indecision, then strode forward. At the same time, an old man, thin, tall and white-haired, issued from the dugout evidently attracted by the gunshot; and soon after, the cabin door opened, and the girl of the cove looked out inquiringly.

In the meantime the young man slowly descended the hill to the oval valley, while Willock hurried forward to meet him.

"Don't you come no futher!" Willock commanded, threatening with his gun. "Keep your hands above your head until I can ship your cargo."

Obediently he stood while the great whiskered fellow took the weapons from his belt, and dived into his hip pockets.

"That'll do. Now — what do you want?"

"It's hard to put it into a few words," the other

complained. "I'd like to have a little talk with you."

"You are one of them fellows that come here to run us out of the country, ain't you? I don't remember seeing you, but I guess you belong to the bunch over on Red River. Well, you see we're still here, meaning to stay. Are your pards outside there, waiting for a message?"

"Nobody knows I'm here, or thought of coming. Let me put that affair in its true light. The boys are all under our boss, and when he lays down the law it isn't for us to argue with him — we carry out orders —"

"Unless there's a Brick Willock involved in them orders," returned the man, with a grim smile.

"But it's our duty to *try* to carry out the orders, whether we like 'em or not. So you won't hold that against me — that little scrimmage of last month, especially as you came out best man."

"I used to have a boss, myself," Willock spoke uncompromisingly. "But when he give me certain orders, one particular night that I recollect, I knocked him on the head and put out for other parts. You must of thought yourself in *pretty* business coming over here to take away the land and all on it, that's belonged to me for nine years, and no-

body never having tried to prize me out of it except some trifling Injuns and horse-thieves. Ain't they *no* honesty in the world? Hasn't no man his property rights? I guess your boss knowed this wasn't *his* land, didn't he? What's going to become of this country when man isn't satisfied with what is his'n? Well, now you've had a little talk with me, and hoping you've enjoyed it, you can just mosey along. I'll send your weapons after you by a messenger."

The young man cast a despairing glance toward the girl who stood like a statue in her doorway, gravely listening. The man with the bushy white hair had drawn near, but evidently with no thought of interfering.

"Willock," the voice came so eager, so impetuous, that the words were somewhat incoherent, "I've *got* to talk to your daughter — hold on, don't shoot, *listen!* — that's what I've come for, to see her and — and meet her and hear her voice. I can't help it, can I? It's been two long years since I left home, back East, and in all these two years I've never seen anything like your little girl and — and what harm can it do? I say! Have pity on a fellow, and do him the biggest favor he could enjoy on this earth when it won't cost you a penny, or a

turn of your hand. Look here — hold on, don't turn away! — I'm just so lonesome, so homesick, so dead *killed* by all these sand-hills and alkali beds and nothing to talk to from one year's end to the next but men and cattle. . . ."

Willock glared at him in silence, fingering the trigger thoughtfully.

"There I've sat, on that hill," he continued, "since two o'clock last night, waiting for daylight so I could ask you to help a miserable wretch that's just starving to death for the sound of a girl's voice, and the sight of a girl's smile. Isn't this square, waiting for you, and telling you the whole truth? I never saw her but once, and that was from this same hill. She didn't know I was watching; it was yesterday. Maybe all I'm saying sounds just crazy to you, and I reckon I am out of my senses, but until I saw her I didn't know how heartsick I was of the whole business."

"It *is* kinder lonesome," remarked the other gruffly. He lowered his gun and leaned on it, irresolutely. "You've sure touched me in the right spot, son, for I knows all you mean and more that you ain't even ever dreampt of. But you see, we don't know nothing about your name, your character, if you've got one, nor what you really in-

tends. I like your looks and the way you talk, fine, just fine, but I've saw bobcats that was mighty sleek and handsome when they didn't know I was nigh."

"My name in Wilfred Compton. I — I have a letter or two in my pocket that I got a long time ago; they'd tell something about me but I'd rather not show 'em, as they're private —"

"From your gal, I reckon?" asked Willock more mildly.

"Yes," he answered gloomily.

"Carried 'em as long as a year?"

"Nearly two years."

"Mean to still lug 'em around?"

"Of course I'm going to keep 'em."

"Well, I don't deny *that's* pretty favorable. Now look here, son, I've been half-crazy from lonesomeness, and I don't believe I've got the heart to send you away. That gal of ours — she's just a kid, you understand. . . . Now you wouldn't be taking up no idea that she was what you'd classify as a young lady, or anything like that, eh?"

"Of course not — she's fifteen or sixteen, I should think. Upon my honor, Willock, any thought of sentiment or romance is a thousand miles from my mind."

"Yes, just so. But such thoughts travels power-

ful fast; don't take 'em long to lap over a thousand mile."

"But it's because she *is* a young girl, fresh and unartificial as the mountain breezes, that I want to be with her for a little while — yes, get to know her, if I may."

Willock turned to the taciturn old man standing a little behind him. "Bill Atkins, what do you say?"

"I say, fire him and do it quick!" was the instant rejoinder, accompanied by threatening twitchings of the huge white mustache.

Willock was not convinced. "Son, if you sets here till we have had our breakfast, and has held a caucus over you, I'll bring you the verdict in about an hour. If you don't like that, they's nothing to do but put out for your ranch."

"I go on duty at seven," replied the young man composedly, "but I have a friend riding the line that'll stay with it till I come. So I'll wait for your caucus."

"That friend — one of them devils I shot at the other day?"

Wilfred Compton smiled with sudden sunniness. "Yes."

Somewhere beneath the immense whiskers, an an-

swering smile slipped like a breeze, stirring the iron-gray hair. "I kinder believe in you, son! Nobody can't gainsay that you've played the man in this matter. Now, just one thing more. You must swear here before me, with Bill Atkins for an unwilling witness, that should we let you make the acquaintance of our little gal, and should you get to be friends, you two, that the very fust minute it comes to you that she ain't no little gal, but is in the way of being food for love — Bill Atkins, air I making myself plain?"

"You ain't," returned the old man sourly. "You're too complicated for ordinary use."

"Then *you* tell him what I mean."

The old man glared at Wilfred fiercely. "If we decide to grant your request, young man, swear on your honor that the second you find yourself thinking of our little girl as a *woman*, to be wooed and won, you'll put out, and never stop till you're so far away, you'll be clear out of her world. And not one word to her, not so much as one hint, mind you, as to the reason of your going; it'll just be good-by and farewell!"

"You see," Willock interpolated, "she is nothing *but* a little gal, and we don't want no foolish ideas to the contrary. You takes her for what she is,

nothing took from nor added to. In course, she'll be growed up some day, I reckon, though may the good Lord take a good long time finishing up the work He's begun so noble. When she's growed up, when she's a woman, it ain't for us to say how you come and how you go, take from or add to. But while she's a kid, it is different, according."

"You have my word of honor to all these conditions," Wilfred cried lightly. "As a child of the mountains I ask for her acquaintance. If I should ever feel differently about her, I'll go away and stay away until she's a woman. Surely that's enough to promise!"

"There ain't too much to promise, when it comes to the peace and happiness of our little girl," retorted the old man, "but I can't think of any more for you to take oath to."

"Me nuther, Bill," agreed Willock. "Seems to me the young man is bound as firm as humans can do the binding. Now you sit right here, son, don't come a step nigher the house, and we'll go to breakfast; and later you'll know whether or not all this promising has been idle waste of time."

"But I can see how it'll turn out," growled Atkins, "for she is always a-looking for something

new, something out of the big world that she don't know nothing about."

"Never mind, Bill, don't give up so quick," Willock reproached him, as they turned away. "She's been having a good look at him all this time, and it may be she have took a distaste to him already."

CHAPTER XI

THE HALF-OPENED BUD

THE two men went into the cabin. An hour later they reappeared, accompanied by the girl. Wilfred was still seated obediently on the rock, but at sight of them he rose with a gay laugh and advanced.

"Come over here in the shade," Willock called, as he strode toward a grassy bank that sloped up to a line of three cedar trees of interlocked branches. "Come over here and know her. This is our gal."

Lahoma looked at the young man with grave interest, taking note of his garments and movements as she might have examined the skin and actions of some unknown animal. Bill Atkins also watched him, but with suspicious eye, as if anticipating a sudden spring on his ward.

"Set down," said Willock, sinking on the grass. "The last man up is the biggest fool in Texas!"

Lahoma and Wilfred instantly dropped as if shot, at the same time breaking into unexpected laughter

that caused Willock's beard to quiver sympathetically. Bill Atkins, sour and unresponsive, stood as stiffly erect as possible, aided no little in this obstinate attitude by the natural unelasticity of age.

The young man exclaimed boyishly, still smiling at the girl, "We're friends already, because we've laughed together."

"Yes," cried Lahoma, "and Brick is in it, too. That's best of all."

"*I* ain't in it," cried Bill Atkins so fiercely that the young man was somewhat discomposed.

"Now, Bill," exclaimed the girl reprovingly, "you sit right down by my side and do this thing right." She explained to the young man, "Bill Atkins has been higher up than Brick, and he knows forms and ceremonies, but he despises to act up to what he knows. Sit right down, Bill, and make the move." There was something so unusual in the attitude of the blooming young girl toward the weather-beaten, forbidding-looking man, something so authoritative and at the same time so protecting, at once the air of a superior who commands and who shelters from the tyranny of others — that Wilfred was both amused and touched.

"Yes, Bill," said Willock, "make the move. Make 'em know each other."

"This is Miss Lahoma Willock," growled Bill; "and this "— waving at the young man disparagingly —"*says* he is Wilfred Compton. Know each other!"

"I'm glad to know you," Lahoma declared frankly. "It's mighty lucky you came this way, for, you see, I just live here in the cove and never touch the big world. I believe you know a thousand things about the world that we ain't never dreamed of —"

"— That we have never dreamed of," corrected Bill Atkins.

"— That we have never dreamed of," resumed Lahoma meekly; "and that's what I would like to hear about. I expect to go out in the big world and be a part of it, when I am older, when I know how to protect myself, Brick says. I'm just a little girl now, if I do look so big; I'm only fifteen, but when I am of age I'm going out into the big world; so that's why I'm glad to know you, to use you like a kind of dictionary. Are you coming back here again?"

"I hope so!" he exclaimed fervently.

"And so do I. In my cabin I have a long list of things written down in my tablet that I'd like to know about; questions that come to me as I sit look-

ing over the hill into the sky, things Brick doesn't know, and not even Bill Atkins. You going to tell me them there things?"

Bill interposed: "Will you kindly tell me those things?"

"Will you kindly tell me those things?" Lahoma put the revised question as calmly as if she had not suffered correction.

"You see how it is, son," Willock remarked regretfully; "Lahoma keeps pretty close to me, and I'm always a-leading her along the wrong trails, not having laid out an extensive education when I was planning the grounds I calculated to live in. When I got anything to say, I just follows the easiest way, knowing I'll get to the end of it if I talk constant. People in the big world ain't no more natural in talking than in anything else. They builds up fences and arbitrary walls, and is careful to stay right in the middle of the beaten path, and I'm all time keeping Bill busy at putting up the bars after me, so Lahoma will go straight."

"So that's why I'm glad to know you," Lahoma said gravely. "But why did you want to know *me?*" She fastened on him her luminous brown eyes, with red lips parted, awaiting the clearing up of this mystery.

Wilfred preserved a solemn countenance, "I've been awfully lonesome, Lahoma, the last two years because, up to that time, I'd lived in a city with friends all about town and no end of gay times — and these last two years, I've been in the terrible desert. You are the first girl I've seen that reminded me of home; when I saw you and knew you were my kind, the way you held yourself and the smile in your eyes —"

Bill interposed: "Don't you forget that binding, young man!"

"Of course not. But I don't know how to tell just what it means to me to be with her — with all of you, I mean — but her especially, because — well, I had so many friends among the girls, back home and — and — It's no use trying to explain; if you've known the horrible lonesomeness of the plains you already understand, and if you don't . . ."

"I know what you mean," Willock remarked, with a reminiscent sigh.

"Let it not be put in words," Bill persisted. "If a thing can't be expressed, words only mislead. I never knew any good to come of talking about smiles in eyes. There's nothing to it but misleading words."

"Go on, Lahoma," said Willock encouragingly, "we're both staying with you, to see that you come out of this with flying colors. Just go ahead."

"I want to ask you all about yourself," remarked Lahoma thoughtfully, "because I can see from your face, and the way you talk, that you're a real sample of the big world. If I tell you all about myself, will you do the same?"

Wilfred promised, and Lahoma entered on the history of her childhood. Wilfred looked and listened joyously, conscious of the unusual scene, alive to the subtle charm of her fearless eyes, her unreserved confidences, the melting harmony of her musical tones. To be sure, she was only a child, but he saw already the promise of the woman. The petals as yet were closed, but the faint sweet fragrance was already astir. He found, too, that in her nature was already developed something not akin to youth, something impersonal, having nothing to do with one's number of years — like the breath of experience, or the ancient freshness of a new day. It was born of the mountains and nourished in the solitude of the plains.

How different the girls of fifteen or sixteen such as he had known in the city or in sophisticated villages in the East! Lahoma had not been so en-

grossed by trivial activities of exacting days that she had lacked time for thought. Her housekeeping cares were few and devoid of routine, leaving most of the hours of each day for reading, for day-dreaming, for absorbed meditation. Somehow the dreams seemed to linger in her voice, to hover upon her brow, to form a part of her; and the longings of those dreams were half-veiled in her eyes, looking out shyly as if afraid of wounding her guardians by full revelation. She wanted to meet life, to take a place in the world — but what would then become of Willock and Bill?

"Bill used to live seven miles away at the mountain with the precipice," she went on, after she had told about the wonderful window. "But it was too far off. When he got to know me, it tired him, walking this far twice a day, morning and night,— didn't it, Bill! So at last Brick and Bill decided to cut some cedars from the mountain and make me a cabin,— they took the dugout to sleep in. There are two rooms in the cabin, one, the kitchen where we eat — and the other, my parlor where I sleep. Some time you shall visit me in the cabin, if Brick and Bill are willing. They made it for me, so I couldn't ask anybody in, unless they said so."

"We aren't far enough along," observed Bill, "to be shut up together under a roof."

"I'd like to have you visit my parlor," Lahoma said somewhat wistfully. "I'd like to show you all my books — they were Bill's when we first met him, but since then he's given me everything he's got, haven't you, old Bill!" Lahoma leaned over and patted the unyielding shoulder.

Bill stared moodily at the top of the mountain as if in a gloomy trance, but Wilfred fancied he moved that honored shoulder a trifle nearer the girl.

She resumed, her face glowing with sudden rapture: "There are six books — half a dozen! Maybe you've heard of some of them. Bill's read 'em over lots of times. He begins with the first on the shelf and when he's through the row, he just takes 'em up, all over again. I like to read parts of them — the interesting parts. This is the way they stand on the shelf: *The Children of the Abbey* —that's Bill's favorite; *The Scottish Chiefs, David Copperfield, The Talisman, The Prairie, The Last of the Mohicans.*"

"I like *The Children of the Abbey* best, too," observed Brick Willock thoughtfully. "Lahoma, she's read 'em all to me; that's the way we get through the winter months. They's something

softening and enriching about that there *Children of the Abbey;* and *Scottish Chiefs* has got some mighty high work in it, too. I tells Lahoma that I guess them two books is just about as near the real thing out in the big world as you can get. *David Copperfield* is sort of slow; I've went with people that knowed a powerful sight more than them characters in David. I used to drift about with a bunch of fellows that Uriah Heep couldn't have stood up against for five minutes. *The Talisman* is noble doings, too, but not up-to-date. As for *The Prairie* and *The Last of the Mohicans,* them is dissatisfying books,— they make you think, being as you lives in just such quarters, interesting things might happen most any minute — and they never does."

"Why, Brick!" Lahoma reproached him. "*This* has happened —" she nodded at Wilfred Compton. "Don't you call that interesting?"

"That's the way *I* discusses them books," returned Willock with manifest satisfaction. "I wasn't never no man to be overawed by no book, which, however high and by whoever wrote, ain't no more like life than a shadow in a pool. Try to grab that shadow, and where is it? Just to go out after game and climb the mountains all day and

come home of an evening to sit down to a plate of bacon and eggs, and another of the same, with coffee smoking on the little stove, and Lahoma urging on the feast — that's more of real living than you'd get out of a big library. Ain't it, Bill?"

"Now *we* want to talk, Brick," interposed Lahoma — "don't we, Wilfred?"

"So your cabin was built," Wilfred prompted her, "and the men took the dugout."

"Yes — and then, oh! the most wonderful thing happened: a family settled in the arm of the mountain at the west end — a family that had a woman and a baby in it — a sure-enough woman with a sweet face and of a high grade though worked down pretty level what from hardships — and a baby that laughed, just laughed whenever he saw me coming in the dugout — and I was over there every day. And that's how I got to be like a woman, and know how to dress, and how to meet strangers without being scared, and preside at table, and use language like this. Other settlers began coming into Greer, but they were far away, and Brick and Bill don't like folks, so they stayed shut up pretty close. But for three years I had the mother and her baby to show me how to be a woman. Then came the soldiers. Brick thinks a big cattle-king

stood in with Congress, and he got the soldiers sent here to drive out all the settlers because they were beginning to farm the land instead of letting it grow wild for the cattle. Anyway, all the settlers were driven out of the country — and it's been four years since I lost my only friends in the world — except Brick and Bill. What makes me and Brick and Bill mad is, that the soldiers didn't have any right to drive out the settlers, because Texas claims this country, and so does the United States, but it's never been settled."

"But they didn't drive *you* out," Wilfred remarked inquiringly.

"You see," Brick explained simply, "we didn't want to go."

"It nearly broke Mrs. Featherby's heart to have to leave," Lahoma added, "for they'd got a good stand of wheat and I think she liked me 'most as well as I liked her. But Mr. Featherby came from Ohio, and he had respect to the government, so when the soldiers said 'Go,' he pulled up stakes."

"We ain't got no respect to nothing," Brick explained, "that stands in the way of doing what we're a mind to. The soldiers come to force *us* out, but they changed their minds. I reckon they knew they hadn't no morality on their side. Sure thing,

they knowed they had but very little safety, whilst occupying their position. None was left but us in this country till you cattlemen come monopolizing Heaven and earth. Knowing we got just as much right to this cove as Uncle Sam himself, we expect to stay here at anchor till Lahoma steams out into the big world with sails spread. She expects to tug us along behind her — but I don't know, I'm afraid we'd draw heavy. Until that time comes, however, we 'lows to lay to, in this harbor. We feels sheltered. Nothing ain't more sheltering than knowing you have a moral right and a dependable gun."

"So that's about all," Lahoma went on. "These past four years, we've just been to ourselves, with a long journey once a year to the settlements; and all the time I had those sweet thoughts to dream over, about the little family that used to live in the west mountain. And I've tried to do like Mrs. Featherby used to do, and be like she was, and if I can make as fine a woman I needn't ask any more. She'd been to Europe, too, and she'd taught school in New England. Bill Atkins is higher up than Brick — Bill used to know Kit Carson and all those famous pioneers, and he's been most everywhere — except in settled places. When a boy he saw Sam Houston and ate with him, and he has heard David

Crockett with his own ears — has heard him say 'Be sure you're right, then go ahead,' that's how far *Bill* has been. But it sort of hurt Brick's neck, and even Bill's, to look up high enough to see where Mrs. Featherby had risen. She was like you — right out of the big world. She came out here because the family was awful poor. Is that why you left the big world?"

Wilfred shook his head. "I'm poor enough," he said, "but it wasn't that. It was a girl."

Brick Willock explained, "He's got a sweetheart; he's been carrying her letters for about two years. He's done spoke for, Lahoma, staked out, as a fellow might say, and squatted on."

Lahoma looked at him in breathless interest. "A girl out in the big world? Completely civilized, I reckon! Was she as old as I am?"

"Why, honey!" Brick exclaimed uneasily, "*you* ain't got no age at all, to speak of! What are you but a mere child? This young man is talking about them as has got up to be old enough to think of sweethearting — something respectable in *years*."

"And how old does a sweetheart have to be?" demanded Lahoma with some displeasure. "I feel old enough for anything, and Wilfred doesn't look any older than the knight standing guard in *The*

Talisman. Besides, look at David Copperfield and Little Em'ly."

"That was child's work," retorted Brick.

"I was afraid of this," growled Bill Atkins restlessly.

Wilfred laughed out. "Don't worry. My eastern girl is at least nineteen years old, and so thoroughly civilized that she thinks this part of the world is still overrun with Indians and buffaloes. She wouldn't live out here for a fortune, and she wouldn't marry a man back East without one — that's why I'm here. I didn't have the fortune."

"Does she *love* you, Wilfred?" Her voice was so soft, her eyes were so big, that Bill uttered a smothered groan, and even Brick sat up.

"She did the last time I saw her — can't say how she feels now; that's been about two years ago." He spoke lightly; but gazing into the wonderful depths of Lahoma's eyes, he felt a queer sensation like a lost heart-beat.

"Did she send you here as a kind of test?"

"Oh, no, she told me good-by and we parted forever. Both of us were poor,— you can't live in the city if you're poor; you can *be* poor there, but not *live*. By this time she's found some one with property, I dare say — she's tremendously handsome

and accomplished, and has a very distinguished-looking mother and they have friends in society — she'll make it all right, no doubt." His voice was matter-of-fact even to indifference; but for all that, he seemed to be deeply inhaling Lahoma's freshness of morning-rose sparkling with dew.

"Does it pierce your heart to think of her marrying somebody else?" Her voice was sweet with the dream-passion of a young girl.

"When I left home, I flung myself into the life of a cow-puncher and did all I could to keep from thinking. So my heart's rather callous by this time. I don't seem to mind like I thought I would if I should sit down to think about it. That's what I've avoided like the plague — sitting down to think about it. But I believe I could sit down and think about it now, pretty calmly."

"Then that's what I'd do," Lahoma cried. "I'd just face it. She isn't worthy of you if she'd rather have a fortune than the man she loves. I'd just sit down and face it."

"I will!" He had never before thought it could be easy. It seemed very easy, now.

"Maybe I could help you," Lahoma suggested earnestly. "When Mrs. Featherby lived near, I asked her all about such cases and got her advice and

experience. Change of scene and time are the greatest remedies. You've had both. Then you must tell yourself that she isn't worthy. And then you'll remind yourself that there are *other* girls in the world. Then you keep your mind occupied,— that is a great thing. If you come to the cove to visit us, we will try to occupy your mind — won't we Brick? — and Bill?"

Bill looked at Wilfred glumly. "It's too occupied now, I'm afraid."

"Bill, this is a-growing on you," Brick expostulated. "I like the young chap first rate. He's open and free. Bill, you are hampering, at times. I would go to my dugout if I was you, and cool my head."

"Your head'll be hot enough," growled Bill, "when this has gone too far."

Lahoma opened her eyes wide. "What do you mean?" she demanded, sincerely perplexed.

"Bill," cried Brick warningly, "you're a-going to start up a fire where they ain't even been no kindling laid."

Wilfred rose hastily. "I should like dearly to come, and come often," he exclaimed, "but I couldn't force myself where I'm not wanted."

"In that case," remarked Bill inflexibly, "you're

seeing me for the last time, and may look your fill!"

Wilfred smiled at him tolerantly and turned to Willock. "I ought to go to my work, Brick. I won't try to explain what this hour has meant to me for I believe you understand. I'm like a man crossing the desert who finds a spring and gets enough water to last him till the next oasis."

He held out his hand to Lahoma who had risen swiftly at these signs of departure. "God bless you, little girl," he said cheerily. "A man's fortunate who finds such oases along his desert-trail!"

It was not Bill's gruffness, but Lahoma's charm that warned him to flee lest he break his promise to her guardians.

"But you can't go, yet," cried Lahoma, not taking his hand, "there are a thousand things I want to do with you that I've never had a chance to do with anybody else — strolling, for instance. Come and stroll — I'll show you about the cove. Brick and Bill don't know anything about strolling as they do in pictures. Hold out your arm with a crook in it and I'll slip my hand just inside where you'll hold it soft and warm like a bird in its nest. . . . Isn't his noble? And I holds back — excuse me — I *hold* back my skirts with my other

hand, and this is the way we stroll, like an engraving out of the history of Louis the Fourteenth's court. Do, oh, do!" Her bright eyes glowed into his like beckoning stars.

"We stroll," he gravely announced, responding to the pressure of her fingers, but at the same time feeling somewhat guilty as Bill rolled his eyes fearfully at Brick.

When they were a few yards from the trees Lahoma whispered, "Make for the other side of Turtle Hill. I want to feel grown up when I do my strolling, but I'm nothing but a little barefooted kid when Brick and Bill are looking at me!"

Hidden by the shoulder of the granite hill island she stopped, withdrew her hand, and stood very straight as she said, with breathless eagerness, "Answer me quick! Wilfred: ain't I old enough to be a sweetheart?"

"Oh, Lahoma," he protested warmly, "please don't think of it. Don't be anybody's until — until I say the word. You couldn't understand such matters, dear, you wouldn't know the — the proper time. I'll tell you when the time comes."

She looked at him keenly. "Am I to wait for a time, or for a person? I wish you'd never met that girl back East; I think you'd have filled the

bill for me, because, having always lived here in the mountains, I've not learned to be particular. Not but what I've seen lots of trappers and squatters in my day, but I never wanted to stroll with them. I don't see why that eastern girl ever turned you loose from her trap. I think a man's a very wonderful thing; especially a young man — don't you, Wilfred?"

"Not half so wonderful as you, Lahoma." His voice vibrated with sudden intensity. "There's your wonderful hair, like light shining through a brown veil . . . and your eyes where your soul keeps her lights flashing when all the rest of you is in twilight . . . and your hands and feet, four faithful little guides to the wonderful treasures that belong only to maidenhood . . . and your mouth, changing with your thoughts — an adorable little thermometer, showing how high the smiles have risen in your heart; a mouth so pure and sweet —"

"Hey!" shouted Bill Atkins, as he and Brick came around the angle of the hill. "Hi, there! You may call that strolling, but if so, it's because you don't know its true name, if you ask *me!*"

Wilfred came to himself with a sharp indrawing of his breath. "Yes," he stammered, somewhat dizzily, "yes, I — I must be going, now."

She held his hand beseechingly. "But you'll come again, won't you? When I hold your hand, it's like grabbing at a bit of the big world."

"No, Lahoma, I'm not coming again." His look was long and steady, showing sudden purpose which concealed regret beneath a frank smile of liking.

She still held his hand, her brown eyes large with entreaty. "You *will* come again, Wilfred! You must come again! Don't mind Bill. I'll have a talk with him after you're gone. I'll send him over to the ranch after you. Just say you'll come again if I send for you."

"Of course he'll come, honey," said Brick, melted by the tears that sounded in her voice. "He won't get huffy over a foolish old codger like Bill Atkins. Of course he'll come again and tell you about street-cars and lamp-posts. Let him go to his work now, he's been up all night, just to get a word with you. Let him go — he'll come back to-morrow, I know."

Wilfred turned to Brick and looked into his eyes as he slowly released Lahoma's hand.

"Oh!" said Brick, considerably disconcerted. "No, I reckon he won't come back, honey — yes, I guess he'll be busy the rest of the summer. Well, son, put 'er there — shake! I like you fine, just fine, and as you can't come here to see us no more,

being so busy and — and otherwise elsewhere bound — I'm kinder sorry to see you go."

"Partings," said Bill, somewhat mollified, "are painful but necessary, else there wouldn't be any occasion for dentists' chairs."

"That's so," Brick agreed. "You called Lahoma an oasis. And what is an oasis? Something you come up to, and go away from, and that's the end of the story. You don't settle down and live at a spring just because it give you a drink when you was thirsty. A man goes on his way rejoicing, and Wilfred according."

Lahoma walked up to Wilfred with steady eyes. "Are you coming back to see me?" she asked gravely.

"No, Lahoma. At least not for a long, long time. I don't believe it's good for me to forget the life I've chosen, even for a happy hour. When I left the city, it was to drop out of the world — nobody knows what became of me, not even my brother. You've brought everything back, and that isn't good for my peace of mind and so — good-by!"

Tall and straight he stood, like a soldier whose duty it is to face defeat; and standing thus, he

fastened his eyes upon her face as if to stamp those features in a last long look upon his heart.

"Good-by," said Lahoma; this time she did not hold out her hand. Her face was composed, her voice quiet. If in her eyes there was the look of one who has been rebuffed; her pride was too great to permit a show of pain.

Wilfred hesitated. But what was to be done? Solitude and homesickness had perhaps distorted his vision; at any rate he had succumbed to the folly against which he had been warned. He could not accept Lahoma as a mere child; and though, during the scene, he had repeatedly reminded himself that she was only fifteen, her face, her voice, her form, her manner of thought, refused the limits of childhood. Therefore he went away, outwardly well-content with his morning, but inwardly full of wrath that his heart had refused the guidance of his mind.

And she had been so simple, so eager to meet him on an equal plane, even clinging to him as to the only hope in her narrow world that might draw her out into deeper currents of knowledge.

"I've always been a fool," he muttered savagely, as he sought his horse. "I was a fool about Annabel — and now I'm too big a fool to enjoy what

fortune has fairly flung in my path." Presently he began to laugh — it was all so ridiculous, beating a retreat because he could not regard a fifteen-year-old girl as a little child! He drew several time-worn letters from his pocket and tore them into small bits that fluttered away like snowflakes on the wind. He had no longer a sentimental interest in *them,* at all events.

CHAPTER XII

THE BIG WORLD

HE did not come again. Lahoma used to go to the hill-island, which she called Turtle Hill because the big flattened rocks looked like turtles that had crawled up out of the cove to sun themselves; among these turtles she would lie, watching the open mouth of the mountain horseshoe in the vain hope that Wilfred would appear from around the granite wall. Occasionally she descended to the plain and scanned the level world, but it was pleasanter to watch from the cove because one never knew, while in that retreat, who might be coming along the range. On the plain, there were no illusions.

Lahoma courted illusions. And when she knew that Wilfred Compton had severed connections with Old Man Walker she merely exchanged one hope, one dream, for another. The opportunity to learn about the big world was withdrawn; but the anticipation of one day meeting Wilfred again was as strong as ever. She made no secret of this expectation.

Bill Atkins sought to dismiss it effectually. "You don't know about the big world, Lahoma," he declared, "if you think people meet up with each other after they've once lost touch. If all this part of America was blotted out of existence, people in the East wouldn't miss any ink out of the ink-bottle."

Lahoma tossed her head. "Maybe the world *is* big," she conceded. "But if Wilfred isn't big enough to make himself seen in it when I go a-looking, I don't care whether I meet him again or not. When I'm in the big world, I expect to deal only with big people."

"I saw no bigness about *him*," Bill cried slightingly.

"If he isn't big enough to make himself seen," Lahoma serenely returned, "I won't never —"

"You won't ever —" Bill corrected.

"I won't ever have to wear specs for strained eyes," Lahoma concluded, smiling at Bill as if she knew why he was as he was, and willingly took him so because he couldn't help himself.

It was Brick who heard about Wilfred's adventures on leaving the Red River ranch, and as all three sat outside the cabin in the dusk of evening, he retailed them as gathered from a recent trip to the corral. That was a strange story unfolded to

Lahoma's ears, a story rich with the romance of the great West, wild in its primitive strivings and thrilling in its realizations of countless hopes. The narrative lost nothing in the telling, for Brick Willock understood the people and the instincts that moved them, and though Wilfred Compton might differ from all in his motives and plans, he shared with all the same hardships, the same spur to ambition.

It was now ten years since the discovery had been made that in the western part of Indian Territory were fourteen million acres that had never been assigned to the red man and which, therefore, were public land, subject to homestead settlement. As long as the western immigrants could choose among the rich prairie-lands of Iowa, Nebraska, Minnesota, Dakota and Kansas — and the choice was open to all, following the agreement of the plains tribes to retire to reservations,— it was not strange that the unassigned lands of Indian Territory should have escaped notice, surrounded as they were by the Cherokee Strip, the Osage and Creek countries, the Chickasaw Nation, the Wichita, Cado, Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes.

But other public lands were now scarce, or less inviting, and as far back as 1879, when Lahoma was five years old, colonies had formed in Kansas City,

in Topeka and in Texas, to move upon the Oklahoma country. The United States troops had dispersed the "boomers," but in the following year the indefatigable Payne succeeded in leading a colony into the very heart of the coveted land. It was in order to escape arrest — for again the United States cavalry had descended on settlers — that several wagons, among them that of Gledware's, had driven hastily toward the Panhandle, to come to grief at the hands of ruffians from No-Man's Land.

As Brick Willock told of Payne's other attempts to colonize the Oklahoma country, of his arrests, of his attempts to bring his various cases to the trial, she felt that Willock was, in a way, dealing with her personal history, for had she not been named Lahoma in honor of that country which her stepfather had seen only to loose? Time and again the colonists swarmed over the border, finding their way through Indian villages and along desolate trails to the land that belonged to the public, but was enjoyed only by the great cattlemen; as many times, they were driven from their newly-claimed homes by federal troops, not without severity, and their leaders were imprisoned.

But, at last, April the twenty-second, 1889, had been appointed as the day on which the Oklahoma

country was to be opened up to settlement, and it was to meet this event that Wilfred Compton had left Greer County. He was a unit in that immense throng that waited impatiently for the hour of noon — a countless host, stretching along the north on the boundary of the Cherokee Strip, on the south, at the edge of the Cherokee Nation; on the east, along the Kickapoo and Pottawatomie reservations; and on the west, blackening the extremity of the Cheyenne and Arapaho countries. He was one of those who, at the discharge of the carbines of the patroling cavalrymen, joined in the deafening shout raised by men of all conditions and from almost every state in the Union — a shout as of triumph over the fulfilment of a ten-years' dream. And, leaning forward on his pony, he was one of the army of conquest that burst upon the desert, on foot, on horseback, and in vehicles of every description, in the mad rush for homes in a land that had never known the incense of the hearth or the civilizing touch of the plow.

At noon, a wilderness, at night, a land of tents, and on the morrow, a settled country of furrowed fields. "Pioneer work is awful quick, nowadays!" grumbled Bill Atkins, as Brick concluded. "It wasn't so in my time. Up there in the Oklahoma

country, fifty years have been squeezed into a week's time — it's like a magician making a seed grow and sprout and blossom right before the audience. Lucky I came to Greer County, Texas — I don't guess *it'll* ever be anything but sand and a blow."

"It's a great story," Brick declared, with enthusiasm. "I reckon it's the greatest story that America can put out, in the pioneering line. There they had everything in twenty-four hours that used to wear out our ancestors: Injuns, unbroken land, no sign of life for hundreds of miles — and just a turn of the hand and cities is a-coming up out of the ground, and saloons and churches is rubbing shoulders, and there's talk of getting out newspapers. What do you think of it, honey?"

Lahoma was sitting in grave silence, her hands clasped in her lap. She turned slowly and looked at Willock. "Brick, I'm disappointed."

"Which?" asked Willock, somewhat taken aback. "Where?"

"In him — in Wilfred."

"As how so?"

"Going into that wilderness-life, instead of taking his place in the world!"

"Well, honey, if he hadn't come to *this* wilderness, you'd never of saw him."

"Yes — but he wasn't settled, and now he's settled in it. Is that the way to be a man? There's all those other people to do the thing he's doing. Then what's the use of him?"

"Ain't we in the same box?"

"Yes, and that's why I mean to get out of it, some day. But it's different with him. He's chosen his box, and gone in, and shut the lid on himself! I'm disappointed in him. I've been thinking him a real man. I guess I'm still to see what I'm looking for," added Lahoma, shaking her head.

"We'll let it go at that," muttered Bill who was anxious to turn Lahoma's mind from thoughts of Wilfred. "We'll just go ahead and look for new prospects."

"Not till I make a remark," said Willock, laying aside his pipe. "Honey, do you know what I mean by a vision? It calls for a big vision to take in a big person, and you ain't got it. Maybe it wasn't meant for women, or at least a girl of fifteen to see further than her own foot-tracks, so no blame laid and nobody judged, according. If you don't see nothing in that army of settlers going into a raw land and falling to work to make it bloom like the rose, a-setting out to live in solitude for years that in due time the world may be richer by a great

territory, why, you ain't got a big vision. I've got it, for I was born in the West, and I've lived all my life, peaceable and calm, right out here or hereabouts. You've got to breathe western air to get the big vision. You've got to see towns rise out of the turf over night and bust into cities before the harvest-fields is ripe, to know what can be did when men is free, not hampered by set-and-bound rules as holds 'em down to the ways of their fathers. Back East, folks is straining themselves to make over, and improve, and polish up what they found ready-to-hand — but here out West, we creates. It takes a big vision to see the bigness of the West, and you can't get no true idee by squinting at the subject."

Lahoma did not reply, and Bill feared that under the conviction of her friend's eloquence, she had begun to idealize the efforts of Wilfred Compton. He need not have been afraid. To her imagination, "big people" were not living in dugouts, or tents, far from civilization; "big people" were going to the opera every night, and riding in splendid carriages along imposing boulevards every day. Brick and Bill had contrived to live as well as they desired from profits on skins obtained in the mountains; and the small tract of ground they had culti-

vated in a desultory manner had done little beyond supplying themselves with vegetables and the horses with some extra feed. She had no great opinion of agriculture; and though she had taken part in planting and hoeing with a pleasurable zest, she had never entertained herself with the thought that she was engaged in a great work. As to dugouts, they had no place in her dreams of the future. Since Wilfred had chosen to handicap himself with the same limitations that bound her, even the thought of him was to be banished from her world, banished absolutely.

Her day-dreams did not cease, but became more dreamy, more unreal, since the hero of her fancies, for whom she now had no flesh-and-blood prototype, was suggested only by her moods and her books. As the sun-clear days of maidenhood melted imperceptibly into summer glow and winter spaces, the memory of Wilfred's face and voice sometimes surprised her at unexpected turns of solitary musings. But the face grew less defined, the voice lost its distinctive tone, as the years passed uninterruptedly by.

"I reckon it ain't right," said Brick Willock to Bill Atkins as they went one morning to examine their traps before Lahoma was astir, "to keep our

little gal to ourselves as we're doing. You're getting old, Bill, awful old —"

"Well, damn it," growled Bill, "I guess I don't have to be told!"

"You ain't very long for this world, Bill, not in the ordinary course of nature. And when I've laid you to rest under the rock-pile, Lahoma ain't going to find the variety in me that she now has in the two of us. Besides which, I'm in the fifties myself, and them is halves of hundreds."

"Yes," Bill growled, "and give Lahoma time, she'll die, too. Nothing but the mountain'll be left to look out on the plains. Lord, Brick, who do you reckon'll be living in that cove, when we three are dead and gone?"

"Guess I'll be worrying about something else, then."

"Do you reckon," pursued Bill, in an unwonted tone of mellowness, "that those who come to live in our dugout will ever imagine what happy hours we've passed there, just sitting around quiet and enjoying ourselves and one another?"

"They wouldn't imagine *you* was enjoying of yourself, not if they was feeding their eyes on you every day. But I'm awful bothered about Lahoma. I tell you, it ain't right to keep her shut up as in a

cage. Can't you see she's pining for high society such as I ain't got it in me to supply, and you are too cussed obstinate to display?"

"I guess that's so." Bill drew himself stiffly up by the tree above — they were ascending the wooded gully that extended from base to mountain-top. "Well, what's the hurry? She's only seventeen years old."

"Yes, she was only seventeen years old, two years ago; but she's ninteen, now."

Bill Atkins sank upon a rock at the foot of a bristling cedar. "Nineteen! Who, *Lahoma?* Then where've I been all the time?"

"You've been a-traveling along at a pretty fast clip toward your last days, that's where you've been. Just look at yourself! Ain't you always careful in making your steps as if scared of breaking something? And now, you're out of breath!"

"It was knocked out by the thought of her being so old — but I guess you're right. Well, I wouldn't call her life caged-up. The settlers have been moving in pretty steadily, and she has friends amongst all the families where there's women-folks. She has her own pony, and is gone more than suits me; and although there's no young man disposable, we ain't fretting about that, nor her neither."

"I used to think she might be foolish about Wilfred Compton — but Lahoma, she ain't foolish about nothing. Nevertheless, Bill, it ain't right. Settlers is settlers, and what she yearns for is the big world. I would long since of took her out to see it, but dassn't from a liability to be catched up for divers deeds that was unlawfully charged to me in times past. You could have guided her along the city trails, but was too cussed obstinate."

"She's your cousin," retorted Bill, "and it wasn't for me to act her guardian. Besides, did you want to lose her? You couldn't take Lahoma where she'd be seen and known, and expect to get her back again. Maybe it isn't exactly fair to keep her hoarded up — but the times are changing all that, and sorry am I to see it. Do you know, Brick, I once thought you and me and Lahoma could just live here in the cove till time was no more, reading our books, and smoking our pipes, and taking peaceful morning trips like this — to see whether we'd caught a coyote in our traps, or a bobcat, or a skunk."

"Yes, that's all right for us; but Lahoma ain't smoking no pipe, nor is her interest in skunks such as ours."

"Just so — but see how Greer County is getting

settled up — that's what's going to save us, Brick — civilization is coming to Lahoma, she won't have to go out gunning after it."

"Of course I've thought of that. I ain't got your grammar, but my mind don't have to wait to let in an idea after it's put its clothes on. Maybe they comes in nothing but a nightshirt, but I ain't ever knowed *you* to think of nothing yet, that I hadn't entertained in some fashion. Of course, civilization is a-creeping up to the mountain, and I reckon by the time Lahoma is my age it'll be playing an organ in church. But she's at the age that calls for quick work — she's got the rest of her life to settle down in. Most all of a person's life is spent in settling and it's befitting to lay in the foundation aforetime. Look at that dear girl in *The Children of the Abbey,* all them love-passages and the tears she sheds — she was being a young woman! What would that noble book of been had that lovely creature been shut up in a cove till nineteen year of age? Is Lahoma going to have a chance like that amongst these settlers? Will she ever hear that high talk, that makes your flesh sort of creep with pride in your race when you read it aloud?"

"Do you want Lahoma to have a lover, Brick Willock?"

"Bill, if he is fit, I say she ought to have a chance."

"And where are you going to find the man?"

"I'm going to help Lahoma find him. I'm like you, Bill, I hates that lover like a snake this minute, though I ain't no idea who, where, or what he is, or may be. I hates him — but I ain't going to stand in Lahoma's way. No, sir, I 'low to meet civilization half-way. There it is — look!"

Willock stood erect and pointed toward the plain, where perhaps twenty tents had been pitched within the last two weeks. Bill gave an unwilling glance, shrugged his shoulders disdainfully, and resumed progress up the difficult defile.

Willock continued: "Two weeks ago, there wasn't nothing there but naked sand. Now there's three saloons, a hardware store, a grocery, a bank — all of 'em under canvas — and the makings of a regular town. Right out there in the broiling sun! Carloads of lumber and machinery is on its way, and the stage-coach will be putting off mail there before long. That's how civilization is a-seeking out our little gal. But I means to meet it half-way."

"Oh, come on, don't say anything more about it — when I look at those tents I can't breathe

freely. What do you gamble on — a skunk, or a coyote, in the traps?"

"'Tain't them tents that's seeping your breath, it's pure unalloyed age. Yes, sir, I means to meet civilization half-way. I've already been prospecting. There's a party over there in Tent City that's come on from Chicago just from the lust of seeing pioneer-life at first hand, people that haven't no idee of buying or settling — it's a picnic to them. They're camping out, watching life develop — and what's life-and-death earnestness to others is just amusement to them. That there's a test of people high-up. Real folks in the big world don't do nothing, it takes all their time just being folks. You and me could bag a dozen polecats whilst a fine lady was making her finger-nails ready for the day. And these Chicago people is that kind."

"Do you think they'll make friends with Lahoma just to suit you? The kind of people you're talking about are more afraid of getting to know strangers than they are of being set on by wildcats."

"They'll make friends with Lahoma, all right, and invite her home with 'em. That's the way I 'low to set her out in the big world. Lahoma don't know my plans and neither do they, but I was never a man to make my plans knowed when I was going

to hold up people. Of course *I'm* speaking in a figger, but in a figger I may say I've held up several, in my day."

"*They* won't invite Lahoma to Chicago, not if they are the right sort."

"They will invite Lahoma to Chicago," retorted Willock firmly, "and they are the right sort. Wait and see; and when you have saw, render due honor to your Uncle Brick."

CHAPTER XIII

A SURE-ENOUGH MAN

"PARDNER, I sure am glad to see you — put 'er there again! How are you feeling, anyhow? Look mighty tough and wiry, I do say; Here, Bill!" Willock raised his voice to a powerful shout, "Bill! come and see what's blowed in with the tumbleweed and tickle-grass. A sure-enough man, that's what I call him, and me to fight if any dispute's made to the title, according."

The tall bronzed man who was leading his horse along the road entering the mountain horseshoe, smiled with a touch of gravity in the light of his gray eyes. Willock found his chin more resolute, his glance more assured and penetrating, while his step, firm and alert, told of dauntless purpose. He was no longer the wandering cowboy content with a bed on the ground wherever chance might find him at night, but a mature man who had taken root in the soil of his own acres. Only twenty-five or six, his features were still touched with the last lingering mobility of youth; but the set of his mouth

and the gleam of his eyes hinted at years of battle against storms, droughts and loneliness. He was already a veteran of the prairie, despite his youth.

"Everything looks very natural!" murmured Wilfred Compton, gazing about on the seamed walls of granite in whose crevices the bright cedars mocked at winter's threatening hand.

"Yes, mountains is lots more natural than humans. They just sets there serene and indifferent not caring whether you likes their looks or not, and they let 'er blow and let 'er snow, it's all one to them. I reckon when we've been dead so long that nobody could raise a dispute as to whether we'd ever lived or not, that there same boulder what they calls Rocking Stone will still be a-making up its mind whether to roll down into the valley or stay where it was born. Wilfred, if you knowed how glad I am to see you again, you'd be sort of scared, I reckon, thinking you'd fell amongst cannibals. Wonder where that aged trapper is?" He shouted more lustily, and a bristling white head suddenly appeared on the summit of Turtle Hill.

"Great Scott!" yelled Bill Atkins, glaring down upon the approaching figure, "if it ain't Wilfred Compton again! Come on, come on, I was never as glad to see anybody in all my life!"

The young man looked at Willock somewhat dubiously. "He's very much altered, then, since I met him last. I'm afraid he has a gun hidden up there among the rocks."

"Oh, nux, nux," retorted Willock. "He's a-speaking fair. Come along!"

As they ascended the winding road, Wilfred vividly recalled the day when, from the same elevation, he had watched Lahoma buried in her day-dreams. A sudden turn brought the cove into view. Lahoma was not to be seen, but there was the cabin, the dugout and the three cedar trees in whose shade he had made the discovery that he could not regard Lahoma as a little girl. It seemed that the cabin door trembled — was Lahoma's hand upon the latch? And when she opened the door, what expression would flash upon that face he remembered so well? Would she be as glad as Willock and Bill Atkins, when she recognized him? Even one half as glad?

He sighed deeply — it was not to be expected. She had known him only an hour; since then, many settlers had invaded the country about the Granite Mountains, a city had sprung up, not far away — other towns were peeping through the sand, and blooming from canvas to wood and brick. The air

tingled with the electric currents of new life and intense competition.

"Did Lahoma marry?" he asked abruptly as all three descended to the lower level of the cove.

"She never did, yet," replied Bill dryly. "Young man, I'm powerful glad to see you. It's rather chilly out here. I'll take your horse and we'll gather in the dugout and talk over what's happened since we last met. Brick, don't you begin on anything interesting till I come."

"You give me that horse," retorted Brick. "You're too aged a man to be messing with horses. You'll get a fall one of these days that'll lay you flat. You'll never knit them bones together, if you do; you ain't vital enough."

Bill clung grimly to the bridle, muttering something that showed no lack of vitality in his vocabulary.

"He won't let me take no care of him," complained Brick, as he conducted Wilfred to the dugout.

Wilfred cast a longing glance toward the cabin, and again he thought Lahoma's parlor door quivered. He even stopped in the path; but Willock went on, unconscious, and he was obliged to follow.

"It's a strange thing," remarked Brick, as he

descended the hard dirt steps, "how Lahoma has acted on me. I mean, living with her these past twelve years, and all the rest of the world shut out, except Bill. Could I of been told before I saved little Lahoma from the highwaymen that I'd ever worry over an old coon like Bill Atkins, as to whether he broke his neck or not, I'd 'a' laughed, for I'd 'a' had to. But it sure does gall me to have him exposing himself as he does. *I* never wanted Bill to come here, but he just come, like a stray cat. First thing I knowed, he was a-purring at the fireside — well, not exactly a-purring, nuther, but sort of mewing, and looking ready to scratch. He just took up with us and now it's like always being scared to close a door for fear of catching his tail in the jamb — I'm talking in a figger. Come in, pard — this used to be Lahoma's boudoir before we built that cabin for her. See the carpet? Don't tell *me* you're a-walking on it, and not noticing! See that little stove? I brung it clear across the mountains from a deserted wagon, when I was young. Two legs is gone and it's squat-bellied, and smokes if the wind gives it a chance; but I wouldn't trade it for a new one. Set on this bench. I recollect as well as if it 'us yesterday, Lahoma a-setting there with her legs untouching of the floor, learning

'A' and 'B' and asking thousands of questions and getting herself civilized. I couldn't do a finished job, but Bill took her by the hand later, then a Mrs. Featherby, what moved over in the west mountain, added stores from New England and travels in Europe. When the settlers come, she gleaned all they knowed, always a-rising and a-looking out for new country. That's a wonderful girl!" he added with conviction.

When Bill came, they sat about the stove, the light from the famous window bringing out with clear distinctness Brick's huge form and bristling beard, Bill's thin figure surmounted by its shock of white hair, and Wilfred's handsome grave face and splendidly developed physique. It was so warm below the ground that the fire in the stove was maintained at the lowest state possible; but when the western light quickly vanished from the window, the glowing coals gave homely cheer to the crude room.

In answer to their questioner, Wilfred told of his experiences on his quarter-section: how he had broken the prairie land, put in his crops, watched them wither away in the terrible dry months, roughed it through the winters, tried again, fought through another drought, staked all on the next

spring's planting, raised a half-crop, paid off his chattel mortgage, tried again,— succeeded.

"I've stayed right with it," he said gravely, looking from one to the other as they smoked in silence, their eyes on his animated face. "Of course, they required me to stay on the land only during certain months, every year. But I stayed with it all the time; and I studied it; and when I failed, as I did year after year, I failed each time in a different way, because I learned my lesson. And when I'd walled off the cause of each failure, one by one, seemed like there opened before me a broad clear way that led right into the goal I'd been seeking from the first day. Then I closed out all my deals, and looked and saw that everything was trim and ready for winter — and got my horse and started for Greer County."

"And glad we are!" cried Bill Atkins. "I hope you can stay a long time."

"That depends . . . Lahoma is well, I suppose?"

"The picture of health — when she left," Brick declared admiringly, "and the prettiest little gal this side of the angels. When the early sunlight peeps over the mountain and laughs at the cove that's sulking from thinking it's about to be left out in the day's doings — that's like Lahoma's smile.

And when you get down sick as I done once from causes incidental to being made of flesh and blood, and she come and laid her hand on my burning forehead, her touch always made me think of an angel's wing, somehow, although I ain't never set up to be religious, and I think of such things as little as may be — except when Bill draws me to the subject from seeing him so puny, at times."

"Lahoma's not here?" Wilfred asked anxiously.

"Not now, nor for some time," answered Brick.

"I wish," interposed Bill glumly, "that when you're going to talk about me, Brick, you'd begin with Bill and not be dragging me in at the tail-end of what concerns other people. I reckon, Wilfred, you just traveled here to take a look at the country where you used to herd cattle?"

"That wasn't my reason. Principally, I wanted to see Lahoma; and incidentally, my brother."

"Your brother? *He* ain't in these parts, is he?"

"No," ruefully, "but I expected him to be. When I left home to turn cow-puncher, I didn't tell anybody where I'd gone; but just before I left for Oklahoma to turn farmer, I wrote to my brother. And about a month ago, seeing things clearing up before me, I asked him to meet me here at Tent City — he's interested in new towns; he's employed

by a rich man to plant hardware-stores, and I thought he might find an opening here. He came on, and was here several weeks with a party of sightseers from Chicago; but he left with them about a week ago."

Willock sat suddenly erect. "Couldn't have been that Sellimer crowd, I reckon, from Chicago?"

"Yes — Mrs. Sellimer and her daughter, and some of their friends."

Willock whistled loudly. "And that up-and-down looking chap in the gold nose-glasses was your brother?"

"Never thought of that," Bill exclaimed, "although he had your name — he looked so different! But now that you've laid aside your cowboy rigging, I guess you could sit in his class, down at the bottom of it."

Willock was uneasy. "I was told," he observed, "and I took the trouble to get datty on the subject, that them Sellimers — the mother and daughter, and the herd they drift with — is of the highest pedigree Chicago can produce. It sort of jolts me to find out that anybody *we* know is kin to the bunch!"

Wilfred laughed without bitterness. "Don't let my kinship to brother Edgerton disturb your ideal. We're so different that we parted without saying

good-by, and although I had the weakness to imagine we might patch up old differences if we could meet here in the desert, I suppose we'd have fallen out in a day or two — we're so unlike. And as to Miss Sellimer — Annabel Sellimer — she is the girl whose letters I was carrying about with me when I first saw you. She refused me because I was as poor as herself; so you see, the whole bunch is out of my class."

"That's good," Willock's face cleared up. "Mind you, I ain't saying that as for me and Bill, we'd wouldn't rather sit with you in a dugout than with them in a palace on Lake Michigan. But it's all a matter of getting Lahoma out into the big world, and you gave me a terrible jolt, scaring me that after all we'd made a mistake, and they was just of your plain every-day cloth."

Wilfred moved uneasily. "Has Lahoma made their acquaintance, then?"

"It looks like it, don't it?"

"What looks like it?" Wilfred asked with sudden sharpness.

"Why, her going off with 'em to spend the winter in high life."

"That's why I was so glad to see you," Bill explained, "her being gone, and us so lonesome.

That's why I'd like to have you stay with us a long time — until she comes back, if it suits you."

"But I thought. . . . But I came here to see Lahoma," cried Wilfred, unable to conceal his disappointment. "I thought as I came up the road that I saw her half-opening the cabin-door."

"That was Red Feather taking a peep at you. He's the Indian that brought Lahoma to Willock, as a child. He comes, about once a year, to see us, but this time he was a little too late for Lahoma. Yes, she's gone East — they're all putting up in Kansas City just now, on their way to Chicago."

"Son," said Willock, puffing steadily at his pipe, "why did you want to see Lahoma?"

"Well — you know she was just a child when I was here before, but she's hovered before my mind a good deal — I've been too busy to seek the acquaintance of strangers — just want to keep the few I know." He blew a rueful breath. "You can't think how all my air-castles have fallen about my ears! I wanted to see Lahoma! Yes, I wanted to see how she'd turned out. I have a good farm, now, not very far from Oklahoma City and — Well, being alone there, year after year, a fellow

gets to imagining a great many things —" He stopped abruptly.

"That's so," Willock agreed sympathetically. "I ain't a-saying that if Lahoma'd been like me and Bill, she mightn't of liked farming with you first-class. But she was born as an associate of high men and women, not cows and chickens. It's the big world for her, and that's where she's gone. She's with real folks. Be Mr. Edgerton Compton your brother, or be he not, you can't imagine *him* setting down with us sociable in this dugout. You're right about his being different. And the fact that Miss Sellimer turned you down is encouraging, too. It shows you couldn't run in her course; you didn't have the speed. I guess we ain't made no mistake after all."

There was silence, broken presently, by Bill — "I'm glad you've come, sure!"

Presently the door opened, and the Indian chief glided into the apartment with a grunt of salutation. He spread his blanket in a corner, and sat down, turning a stolid face to the fire.

"Don't pay no attention to him," remarked Willock, as if speaking of some wild animal. "He comes and goes, and isn't troublesome if you feeds

and sleeps him, and don't try to lay your hand on him."

Bill Atkins rose. "But *I* always light up when he comes," he remarked, reaching stiffly for a lantern which in due time glimmered from the partition wall. "Are you hungry, Wilfred? We never feed till late; it gives us something to sleep on. I lie awake pretty constantly all night, anyhow, and when I eat late, my stomach sorter keeps me company."

Wilfred declared that he was not in the least hungry.

"I'm afraid you're disappointed, son," observed Willock, filling his pipe anew.

Wilfred turned to him with a frank smile. "Brick — it's just awful! It's what comes from depending on something you've no right to consider a sure thing. I never thought of this cove without Lahoma in it; didn't seem like it could be so empty. . . . How did she get acquainted with Annabel? — and with my brother?"

"It come about, son. I see at once that the bunch of 'em was from the big world. I come home and told Bill, 'Them's the people to tow Lahoma out into life,' says I. So they invited her to spend

the winter with them, the Sellimers did, and show her city doings."

"Yes — but how did it come about?"

"Nothing more natural. I goes over to their tent and I tells them of the curiosities and good points of these mountains, and gets 'em to come on a sort of picnic to explore. So here they comes, and they gets scattered, what with Bill and Lahoma and me taking different ways — they liked Lahoma first time they see her, as a matter of course. And so, that Miss Sellimer, she gets separated from all the rest, and I shows her a dandy hiding-place where nobody couldn't find her, and I shows her what a good joke it would be to pretend to be lost. So I leaves her there to go to tell her crowd she dares 'em to find her. Are you listening?"

"Of course."

"Well, while she was setting there waiting to be searched for, of a sudden a great big Injun in a blanket and feathers and red paint jumps down beside her and grabs her and picks her up, and about as quick as she knew anything, she was gagged and bound and being bore along through the air. I reckon it was a terrible moment for her. Now there is a crevice in the top of the mountain that nobody don't never explore, because it's just a

crack in the rock that ain't to be climbed out of without a ladder. So the Injun carries her there, and lets her down with a rope that it seems he must of had handy somewheres, and he puts out; and there she is, in a holler in the mountain, not able to move or cry out no more than if she'd been captured by a regular highwayman."

Wilfred stared at Willock in complete bewilderment. Willock chuckled.

"There was a terrible time!" remarked Bill.

"Dark was a-coming on before the party got plumb scared," Willock continued, "but they brushed and combed that mountain looking for the poor lost lady, and as I tells 'em she's a-hiding a-purpose, they think it a pore sort of joke till midnight catches 'em mighty serious. Torches is carried here and there and everywhere, but no use. You would think that the next day the crowd would naturally look down in that crevice, but that's because I've posted you up on where she is. There's lots of other crevices, and no reason as they can see why Miss Sellimer should take the trouble to worm herself down into any of 'em — and as nobody saw that Injun, how could they suspicion foul play? It must of been *awful* for pore Miss Sellimer, all bound and gagged in that horrible way, but

it takes heroic treatment to get some cures — and so Lahoma went with 'em to spend the winter."

"But the Indian — ?"

"Needn't think about *him* no more, son, we got no more use for *that* Injun. Well, on the next day, Lahoma is looking everywhere, being urged on by me, and lo, and behold! when she comes to that crevice — looked like she couldn't be induced to go there of her own will, but it was brung about finally — what does she see but a tomahawk lying right at the edge what must have been dropped there recent, or the crowd would have saw it the day before. It come to her that Miss Sellimer is a prisoner down below. She looks, but it's too dark to see nothing. Not telling nobody for fear of starting up false hopes, she gets a light and lowers it — and there is that miserable young woman, bound and gagged and her pretty dress all tore. Lahoma jumps to her feet to raise the cry, when she discovers a ladder under a boulder which the Injun must have put there meaning to descend to his victim when the coast was clear. Down she skins, and frees Miss Sellimer, who's half dead, poor young lady! Lahoma comes up the ladder and meets me and I carries her out just like a feather — Well, can't you imagine the rest? I reckon if Miss Sel-

limer lives a thousand years she'll never forget the awfulness of that big Injun and the angel sweetness of the little gal that saved her. Why, if Lahoma had asked for the rings off her fingers, she could have had 'em, diamonds and all."

Wilfred rose and went to stare at the darkness from the small square window. Not a word was spoken for some time. At last the silence was broken by the Indian — "*Ugh!*" grunted Red Feather.

"Just so!" remarked Wilfred, with exceeding dryness.

"What are you thinking, Wilfred?" demanded Brick Willock.

"I'd have thought Lahoma would recognize the ladder."

"So she done; but couldn't the Injun have stole my ladder and carried it to that boulder? Just as soon as Miss Sellimer was well enough to travel, *nothing* couldn't hold her in these parts, and that's why your brother had to leave before seeing you — he's setting to Miss Sellimer, and if Lahoma don't git him away from her, I reckon he's a goner!"

Bill Atkins spoke vaguely. "It wasn't none of my doings."

Wilfred looked steadily at Willock. "What about your whiskers?"

"Oh, as to them, it was like old times; you takes a cloth and cuts it out — painted red — Psha! What are we talking of? Bill, let's show him her letter — what do you say?"

"I reckon it wouldn't hurt," Bill conceded.

"How'd you like it, Wilfred? We can't produce our little gal to keep you company, but her letter would sort of be like hearing her talk, wouldn't it? And if you stay with us a spell, we'll let you read 'em as they come."

Wilfred perceived that Willock was anxious to get his mind off the harrowing adventure of the crevice, and as he was eager to hear the letter, and as Brick and Bill were anxious to hear it again, nothing more was said about the "big Injun."

"Who'll read it?" asked Bill, as he drew the precious letter from the strong box behind the stove.

"Let Wilfred do the deed," Willock suggested. "It travels slow in my company, and though Bill reads 'er correct, he does considerable droning. I expect if Wilfred reads it with unction, it'll sound like a new document."

Wilfred drew the only stool in the room up beside the lantern, and Bill and Brick disposed them-

selves on the bench, each holding his pipe on his knee as if fearful of losing a word. Red Feather, his beady eyes fastened on the young man's face, sat gracefully erect, apparently alert to all that was going on. The lantern reddened the strong clean-cut face of the young man, and touched the up-turned pages to the whiteness of snow. A sudden wind had sprung up, and the flaring blaze from the open stove-door touched to vivid distinctness the giant, the old man and the Indian. Brick closed the stove-door, and the sudden gloom brought out in mellow effect Wilfred's animated face, the dull yellow wall against which his sturdy shoulder rested, and the letter in his hand.

CHAPTER XIV

WRITING HOME

"DEAR Brick and Bill:

"I don't know what to tell first. It's all so strange and grand — the people are just people, but the things are wonderful. The people want it to be so; they act, and think according to the things around them. They pride themselves on these things and on being amongst them, and I am trying to learn to do that, too. When I lived in the cove — it seems a long, long time ago — my thoughts were always away from dirt-floors and cook-stoves and cedar logs and wash-pans. But the people in the big world keep their minds tied right up to such things — only the things are finer — they are marble floors and magnificent restaurants and houses on what they call the 'best streets.' At meals, there are all kinds of little spoons and forks, and they think to use a wrong one is something dreadful; that is why I say the forks and spoons seem more important than *they* are, but they want it to be so.

"They have certain ways of doing everything, and just certain times for doing them, and if you do a wrong thing at a right time, or a right thing at a wrong time, it shows you are from the West. At first, I couldn't say a word, or turn around, without showing that I was from the West. But although I've been from home only a few days, I'm getting so that nobody can tell that I'm more important than the furniture around me. I'm trying to be just like the one I'm with, and I don't believe an outsider can tell that I have any more sense than the rest of them.

"Miss Sellimer is so nice to me. I told her right at the start that I didn't know anything about the big world, and she teaches me everything. I'd be more comfortable if she could forget about my saving her life, but she never can, and is so grateful it makes me feel that I'm enjoying all this on false pretenses for you know my finding her was only an accident. Her mother is very pleasant to me — much more so than to her. Bill, you know how you speak to your horse, sometimes, when it acts contrary? That's the way Miss Sellimer speaks to her mother, at times. However, they don't seem very well acquainted with each other. Of course if they'd lived together in a cove for years, they'd

have learned to tell each other their thoughts and plans, but out in the big world there isn't time for anything except to dress and go.

"I'm learning to dress. I used to think a girl could do that to please herself, but no, the dresses are a thousand times more important than the people inside them. It wouldn't matter how wise you are if your dress is wrong, nor would it matter how foolish, if your dress is like everybody else's. A person could be independent and do as she pleased, but she wouldn't be in society. And nobody would believe she was independent, they would just think she didn't know any better, or was poor. Because, they don't know anything about being independent; they want to be governed by their things. A poor person isn't cut off from society because he hasn't money, but because he doesn't know how to deal with high things, not having practised amongst them. It isn't because society people have lots of money that they stick together, but because all of them know what to do with the little forks and spoons.

"It is like the dearest, jolliest kind of game to me, to be with these people, and say just what they say, and like what they like, and act as they act — and that's the difference between me and them; it's

not a game to them, it's deadly earnest. They think they're *living!*

"Do you think I could play at this so long that one day I'd imagine I was doing what God had expected of me when he sent me to you, Brick? Could I stay out in the big world until I'd think of the cove as a cramped little pocket in the wilderness with two pennies jingling at the bottom of it named Brick and Bill? If I thought there was any danger of that, I'd start home in the morning!

"We are in a Kansas City hotel where all the feathers are in ladies' hats and bonnets instead of in the gentlemen's hair. To get to our rooms you go to a dark little door and push something that makes a bell ring, and then you step into a dugout on pulleys, that shoots up in the air so quick it makes you feel a part of you has fallen out and got lost. The dugout doesn't slow up for the third story, it just stops *that quick* — they call it an 'elevator' and it certainly does elevate! You step out in a dim trail where there are dusky kinds of lights, although it may be the middle of the day, and you follow the trail over a narrow yellow desert, turn to your right and keep going till you reach a door with your number on it. When you are in your

room, you see the things that are considered more important than the people.

"There's an entire room set apart for the sole purpose of bathing! — and the room with the bed in it is separate from the sitting-room. You can go in one and stay a while, and go in another and stay a while, and then go in the third — and you have a different feeling for each room that you're in. I'd rather see everything at once, as I can in my cabin. And that bed! If my little bed at home could be brought here and set up beside this hotel wonder, the very walls would cry out. . . . I wish I could sleep in my little bed to-night, and hear the wind howling over the mountain.

"The dining-room is the finest thing I ever saw; I doubt if the kings and queens of old times ever ate in richer surroundings. There are rows of immense mirrors along the wall and gold borders — and then the tables! I wonder what would happen if anybody should spread newspapers on one of these wonderful tables and use them for a table-cloth? At home, we can just reach out and take what we want off the stove, and help our plates without rising. It's so different here! After you've worried over crooked lists of things to eat that you've never heard of, and have hurried to select

so the waiter won't have to lose any time, the waiter goes away. And when he puts something before you, you don't know what to call it, because it's been so long, you've forgotten its name on that awful pasteboard. But there's something pleasant when you've finished, in just getting up and walking away, not caring who cleans up the dishes!

"I've been to the opera-house, but it wasn't an opera, it was a play. That house — I wish you could see it! — the inside, I mean, for outside it looks like it needs washing. The chairs — well, if you sent that stool of ours to a university you couldn't train it up to look anything like those opera-chairs. And the dresses — the diamonds. . . . Everything was perfectly lovely except what we had come to see, and my party thought it was too funny for anything; but it wasn't funny to me. The story they acted was all about a young couple fooling their parents and getting married without father and mother knowing, and a baby brought in at the last that nobody would claim though it was said to be somebody's that shouldn't have had one — the audience just screamed with laughter over that; I thought they never would quiet down. Out in the big world, babies and old fathers and mothers seem to be jokes. The star of the evening was a mar-

ried actress with 'Miss' before her name. You could hear every word she spoke, but the others didn't seem to try to make themselves plain — I guess that's why they aren't stars, too.

"I've lived more during the last week than I had the previous fifty-one. We must have been to everything there is, except a church. Yesterday was Sunday, and I asked Mrs. Sellimer about it, but she said people didn't go to church any more.

"Maybe you wonder why I don't tell you about our crowd, but I guess it's because I feel as if they didn't matter. I wouldn't say that to anybody in the world but to you, Brick and Bill, and if I hadn't promised to write you every single thing, I wouldn't even tell you, because they are so good to me. It sounds untrue to them, doesn't it? But you *won't* tell anybody, because you've nobody to tell! And besides, they could be different in a minute if they wanted to be; it isn't as if they were helpless.

"Miss Sellimer is witty and talented, and from the way she treats me, I know she has a tender heart. And her mother is a perfect wonder of a manager, and never makes mistakes except such as happen to be the fad of the hour. And Mr. Edgerton Compton could be splendid, for he seems to know everything, and when we travel with him, or go to the

parks and all that, people do just as he says, as if he were a prince; he has a magnificent way of showering money on porters and waiters and cabmen that is dazzling; and he holds himself perfectly *without trying,* and dresses so that you are glad you're with him in a crowd; he knows what to do *all* the time about *everything.* But there he stops. I mean, he isn't trying to do anything that matters. Neither are any of the rest.

"What they are working at now, is all they expect to work at as long as they live — and it takes awfully hard work to keep up with their set. They call it 'keeping in the swim,' and let me tell you what it reminds me of — a strong young steer out in a 'tank,' using all the strength he has just to keep on top of the water, instead of swimming to shore and going somewhere. Society people don't go anywhere; they use all their energy staying right where they are; and if one of them loses grip and goes under — *goodness!*

"I know what Mrs. Sellimer has set her heart on, because she has already begun instructing me in her ideals. She wants her daughter to marry a rich man, and Mr. Edgerton Compton isn't rich, he only looks like he is. Mrs. Sellimer feels that she's terribly poor, herself; it's the kind of poverty that has

all it wants to eat and wear, but hasn't as many horses and servants as it wants. It's just as hard on her as it would be on you if the bacon gave out and you couldn't go for more. Annabel — that's Miss Sellimer — likes Mr. Compton very, very much, but she feels like her mother about marrying a rich man, and I don't think he has much chance. One trouble is that he thinks he must marry a rich girl, so they just go on, loving each other, and looking about for 'chances.'

"I feel like I oughtn't to be wasting my time telling about my friends when there are all these wonderful lights and carpets and decorations and conveniences, so much more interesting. Whenever you want hot water, instead of bringing a bucketful from the spring and building a fire and sitting down to watch it simmer, you just turn a handle and out it comes, smoking; and whenever you want ice-water, you touch a button and give a boy ten cents.

"The funny thing to me is that Annabel and Mr. Compton both think they *have* to marry somebody rich, or not marry at all. They really don't know they *could* marry each other, because imagining they would be unable to keep the wolf from the door. That's because they can't imagine themselves

living behind anything but a door on one of the 'best streets.' We know, don't we, Brick and Bill, that it takes mighty little to keep the coyote from the dugout! And there's something else we know that these people haven't dreampt of — that there's happiness and love in many and many a dugout. I don't know what's behind the doors on the 'best streets.'

"We are not going straight on to Chicago. A gentleman has invited the Sellimers, which of course includes me, to a house-party in the country not far from Kansas City. He is a very rich man of middle age, so they tell me, a widower, who is interested in our sex and particularly in Annabel Sellimer. Mr. Edgerton Compton isn't invited. You see, he's a sort of rival — a poor rival. This middle-aged man has known the Sellimers a long time, and he has been trying to win Annabel for a year or two. If it hadn't been for Mr. Compton she'd have married *his house* before now, I gather. The house is said to be immense, in a splendid estate near the river. I am all excitement when I think of going there for ten days. There are to be fifty guests and the other forty-nine are invited as a means of getting Annabel under his roof. Won't I feel like a little girl in an old English

novel! The best of it is that nobody will bother *me* — I'm too poor to be looked at a second time, I mean, what *they* call poor. Sometimes I laugh when I'm alone, for I feel like I'm a gold mine filled with rich ore that nobody has discovered. Remember the 'fool's gold' we used to see among the granite mountains? I think the gold that lies on the surface must always be fool's gold. The name of the country-house we are to visit is the same as that of the man who owns it —"

Wilfred Compton held the letter closer to the light.

Brick Willock spoke impatiently: "No use to stare at that there word — we couldn't make it out. I guess she got it wrong, first, then wrote it over. Just go ahead."

Bill suggested, "I think the first letter is an 'S.'"

Wilfred scrutinized the name closely.

"Besides," said Willock, "we knows none of them high people, the name wouldn't be nothing to us — and her next letter will likely have it more'n once."

Wilfred resumed the letter: "I must tell you good-by, now, for Annabel's maid has come to help me dress for dinner, and it takes longer than it did to do up the washing, at the cove; and is more tire-

some. But I like it. I like these fine, soft, beautiful things. I like the big world, and I would like to live in it forever and ever, if you could bring the dugout and be near enough for me to run in, any time of the day. I wish I could run in this minute and tell you the thousands and thousands of things I'll never have time to write.

"Your loving, adoring, half-homesick, half-bewildered, somewhat dizzy little girl,

"LAHOMA.

"P. S. Nobody has been able to tell from word or look of mine that I have ever been surprised at a single thing I have heard or seen. You may be quite sure of that."

"I bet you!" cried Willock admiringly. "*Now*, what do you think of it?"

"She won't be there long," remarked Bill, waving his arm, "till she finds out what I learned long ago — that there's nothing to it. If you want to cultivate a liking for a dugout, just live a while in the open."

"I don't know as to that," Willock said. "I sorter doubts if Lahoma will ever care for dugouts again, except as she stays on the outside of 'em, and gets to romancing. A mouthful of real ice-cream

spoils your taste everlasting for frozen starch and raw eggs."

"Lahoma is a real person," declared Bill, "and a dugout is grounded and bedded in a real thing — this very solid and very real old earth, if you ask to know what I mean."

"Lord, *I* knows what you mean," retorted Willock. "You've lived in a hole in the ground most of your life, and are pretty near ripe to be laid away in another one, smaller I grant you, but dark and deep, according. We'll never get Lahoma back the same as when we let her flutter forth hunting a green twig over the face of the waters. She may bring back the first few leaves she finds, but a time's going to come. . . ." He broke off abruptly, his eyes wide and troubled, as if already viewing the dismal prospect.

"Maybe I *am* old," Bill grudgingly conceded, "but I don't set up to be no Noah's ark."

"Oh," cried Willock, his sudden sense of future loss causing him to speak with unwonted irony, "maybe you're just a Shem, or Ham or that other kind of Fat — What's the matter, Wilfred? Can't you let go of that letter?"

"I've made out the name of that widower who's paying court to my old sweetheart," he said, "but

it's one I never heard of before; that's why it looked so strange — it's Gledware."

Willock uttered a sharp exclamation. "Let me see it." He started up abruptly, and bent over the page.

"What of it?" asked Bill in surprise. Willock had uttered words to which the dugout was unaccustomed.

"That's what it is," Willock growled; "it's Gledware!" His face had grown strangely dark and forbidding, and Wilfred, who had never imagined it could be altered by such an expression, handed him the letter with a sense of uneasiness.

"What of it?" reiterated Bill. "Suppose it *is* Gledware; who is *he?*"

"Do you know such a man?" Wilfred demanded.

"Out with it!" cried Bill, growing wrathful as the other glowered at the fire. "What's come over you? Look here, Brick Willock, Lahoma is your cousin, but I claim my share in that little girl and I ask you sharp and flat —"

"Oh you go to — !" cried Willock fiercely. "All of you."

Wilfred said lightly, "Red Feather has already gone there, perhaps."

"Eh?" Willock wheeled about as if roused to

fresh uneasiness. The Indian chief had glided from the room, as silent and as unobtrusive as a shadow.

Willock sank on the bench beside Bill Atkins and said harshly, "Where's my pipe?"

"Don't you ask *me* where your pipe is," snapped Bill. "Yonder it is in the corner where you dropped it."

Willock picked it up, and slowly recovered himself. "You see," he observed apologetically, "I need Lahoma about, to keep me tame. I was wondering the other day if I could swear if I wanted to. I guess I could. And if put to it, I guess I could take up my old life and not be very awkward about it, either — I used to be a tax-collector, and of course got rubbed up against many people that didn't want to pay. That there Gledware — well! maybe it isn't this one Lahoma writes about, but the one I knew is just about middle age, and he's a widower, all right, or the next thing to it — I didn't like Gledware. That was all. I hate for Lahoma to be throwed with anybody of the name — but I guess it's all right. Lahoma ain't going to let nobody get on her off-side, when the wind's blowing."

Bill inquired anxiously, "Did that Gledware you knew, live near Kansas City?"

"He lived over in Indian Territory, last time I heard of him. But he was a roving devil — he might be anywhere. Only — he wasn't rich; why, he didn't have nothing on earth except a little — yes, except a little."

"Then he can't be the owner of a big estate," remarked Wilfred, with relief.

"I don't know that. Folks goes into the Territory, and somehow they contrives to come out loaded down. But I hope to the Almighty it's a different Gledware!"

"Lahoma can hold her own," Bill remarked confidently. "You just wait till her next letter comes, and see if she ain't flying her colors as gallant as when she sailed out of the cove."

Wilfred reflected that his invitation to remain had been sincere; there was nothing to hurry him back to the Oklahoma country — he would, at least, stay until the next letter came. His interest in Lahoma was of course vague and dreamy, founded rather on the fancies of a thousand-and-one-nights than upon the actual interview of a brief hour. But the remarkable change that had taken possession of Wil-

lock at the mention of Gledware's name, had impressed the young man profoundly. In that moment, all the geniality and kindliness of the huge fellow had vanished, and the great whiskered face had looked so wild and dangerous, the giant fists had doubled so threateningly, that long after the brow smoothed and the muscles relaxed, it was impossible to forget the ferocious picture.

"That's what I'll do," Wilfred declared, settling back in his seat, "I'll wait until that next letter comes."

CHAPTER XV

THE DAY OF FENCES

WHILE waiting for Lahoma's letter, Wilfred Compton spent his days in ceaseless activity, his evenings in dreamy musings. Over on the North Fork of Red River — which was still regarded as Red River proper, and therefore the dividing line between Texas and Indian Territory — he renewed his acquaintance with the boys of Old Man Walker's ranch. Henry Woodson, the cowpuncher, still known as Mizzoo was one of the old gang who greeted Wilfred with extravagant joy which shaded away to easy and picturesque melancholy in lamenting the passing of the good old days.

"These is the days of fences," complained Mizzoo, as Wilfred, in answer to his invitation, rode forth with him to view the changes. "Time was, our cattle was bounded on the south by nothing but the south wind, and on the north by nothing but the north wind; but these unmitigated settlers has spiled the cattle business. I'm looking for the old

man to sell out and quit. Why, look at all the little towns that has sprung up so confusing and handy that you don't know which to choose to liquor up. They comes like a thief in the night, and in the morning they're equipped to rob you. I can't keep no change by me — I've asked the old man to hold back my wages till the end of the year. But I'm calculating to make something out of these very misfortunes. You know I always was sort of thrifty — yes, as they *got* to be a settled county round us, it'll needs call for a sheriff, and if all signs don't fail, I'll get the job this week. Then there'll be no more riding of the line for old Mizzoo."

Wilfred rode with him to Mangum, and other villages, with names and without, and he tingled to the spirit of the bounding West. There might be only a few dugouts, some dingy tents and a building or so of undressed pine, but each hamlet felt in itself the possibilities of a city, and had its spaces in the glaring sands or the dead sagebrush which it called "the Square" and "Main Street" and possibly "the park." The air quivered with expectations of a railroad, maybe two or three, and each cluster of hovels expected to find itself in a short

time constituted the county-seat, with a gleaming steel road at its back door.

This spirit of optimism was but a reflection of the miraculous growth of the new country of which Greer County, though owned by Texas, felt itself, in a sense, an integral part. Eight years before, Indian Territory was the hunting-ground of the Indian, and whosoever attempted to settle within its limits was driven forth by the soldiers. It was then a land of dim twilight, full of mystery and wildness, with vast stretches of thirsty plains and bleak mountains around which the storms, unbroken by forests, shrieked in the "straight winds" of many days, or whined the threat of the deadly tornado. And suddenly it became a land of high noon, garish and crude, but wide-awake and striving with all the tireless energy of young blood.

Scarcely had the Oklahoma country been taken possession of before the settlers began agitating the question of an organized territory, and too impatient to wait for Congress to act, held their own convention at Guthrie and divided the land into counties. Congress made them wait five months — an age in the new country — before approving the Organic Act. The district, which a short time before had

been the Unassigned Lands, became the counties of Logan, Oklahoma, Cleveland, Canadian, Kingfisher and Payne. To these was added Beaver County which in Brick Willock's day had been called "No-Man's Land," and which the law-abiding citizens, uniting against bandits and highwaymen, had sought to organize as Cimmaron Territory.

Then came the rivalry between Guthrie and Oklahoma City for the capital, adding picturesqueness to territorial history, and offering incitement to many a small village to make itself the county-seat of its county. The growth of the new country advanced by leaps and bounds. In 1891, the 868,-414 acres of the surplus lands of the Iowa, Sac, Fox and the Pottawatomie-Shawnee reservations formed the new counties of Lincoln and Pottawatomie and increased the extent of some of the old ones. The next year, 3,500,562 acres belonging to the Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians were taken to increase several of the older counties, and to from the new ones of honest old American names — Blaine, Custer, Washita, Dewey, Roger Mills, Beckham and Ellis. In the year following, the Cherokee strip was opened for a settlement together with the surplus lands of the Pawnee and Tonhawa — 5,698,140 acres; besides increasing other counties,

this land furnished forth the new counties of Alfalfa, Garfield, Grant, Harper, Major, Woods, Woodward, Pawnee, Kay and Noble. At the time of Wilfred's visit to Brick Willock, the winter of 1894-5, the opening of the Kickapoo reservation was already a near certainty; while the vast extent of Greer County itself, so long in dispute between Texas and the United States, would in all likelihood be added to the swelling territory of Oklahoma.

The territory, so young but so dauntless, was already agitating the question of statehood — not only so, but of single statehood, meaning thereby the prospective engulfment and assimilation of Indian Territory, that all the land from Texas to Kansas, Missouri and Arkansas might be called by the one name — Oklahoma; a name to stand forever as a symbol of the marvelously swift and permanent growth of a white people, in spite of its Choctaw significance —" Red People."

Although Wilfred had stayed close to his farm, near Oklahoma City, he had kept alive to the rush and swing of the western life; and now that he had leisure to ride with Mizzoo among the bustling camps, and view the giant strides made from day to day by the smallest towns, he was more than ever filled with the exultation of one who takes

part in world-movements. He began to view the hurrying crowds that overran the sidewalks, with a sense of close kinship — these people came from all points of the Union, but they were his people. A year ago, six months ago, they might have been New Yorkers, Californians, Oregonians, but now all were westerners like himself, and though they believed themselves Texans the name made as little difference as that between "Red River" and "Prairie Dog Fork"— in spirit, they were Oklahomans.

If Wilfred had not been a simple visitor, he would have had no time for thought; but now he could look on the life of which he had for a few years been a part, and study it as related to the future. It was as if his boyhood and youth had not been passed in Chicago — the West had blotted out the past as it ever does with relentless hand,— and every thought-channel led toward the light of the future. Lahoma's letter had revived the picture of other days, of another existence, without rousing one wish to return.

The only desire it had stirred in his breast was that of seeing Lahoma again, of taking her by the hand to lead her, not back to the old civilization, but to the new. As he lay awake at night in the

log cabin that had been Lahoma's, his brain for a long time every night was busy with thoughts of that new civilization, and he was stirred with ambition to take part, so that when single statehood or double statehood was achieved, he would be a recognized factor in its transformation from a loosely-bound territory.

He began to think, too, of moving his residence to Oklahoma City, where he would be closer to men of affairs — great men of great enterprises. His farm, of course, would be managed under his superintendence — unless Oklahoma City should be generous enough to spread out and surround it, and lap it up, town-lot after town-lot, till not a red clod was left . . . And if a girl like Lahoma — for surely she had not changed! — if she, little Lahoma . . . And the longing grew on him to see Annabel Sellimer and Lahoma together, that he might study the girl he had once loved with the girl he might love to-morrow. He almost made up his mind to take a brief trip to Chicago, on quitting the cove; perhaps there would be something in Lahoma's next letter to force a decision.

Two weeks passed, but Wilfred did not consider the time lost; there were letters almost daily, by coach, from Lahoma, telling of her adventures in

the great world — the house-party had been delayed on account of Mrs. Sellimer's illness, but was to take place immediately — so said the last letter before the arrival of the news that changed the course of events at the cove. As yet, Lahoma had not met Mr. Gledware, but the fame of his riches and his luxurious home had both increased her curiosity to see him, and her conviction that Mr. Edgerton Compton stood no chance with Annabel. She had discovered, too, that Edgerton Compton was a brother of the Wilfred Compton who had visited them one day in the cove — Wilfred read the letter with great attention, but there was no further reference to himself.

Brick Willock rode over to Mangum nearly every afternoon to hear from Lahoma, but it happened that on the day of the great news, neither he nor Bill had returned from a certain hunting expedition in time for the stage, so Wilfred went for the mail. There was only one letter, addressed to "Mr. B. Willock," and it seemed strangely thin. The young man wondered during all his ten-mile return-trip if Lahoma had fallen ill; and after reaching the log cabin, he kept looking at the slim missive, and turning it over, with vague uneasiness.

Brick and Bill had ridden far, and it was dusk

before they reached home with a deer slung over one of the horses.

"They're getting scarcer every year," complained Bill, as he climbed stiffly to the ground; "I guess they'll finally go the way of the buffalo."

"Get a letter?" asked Brick, hurrying forward. "Huh! *That* it? She is sure getting fashionable! I reckon when she's plumb civilized, she won't write nothing!"

He took the long white envelope and squinted at it inquisitively.

"Well, why don't you open 'er?" snapped Bill. "Afraid you'll spring a trap and get caught?"

"Ain't much here," replied Brick slowly, "and I'm making it last."

"Huh! Nothing is a-lasting when it hasn't been begun," retorted Bill crossly. "See what the little girl says."

"I'm afraid she's sick," observed Wilfred, eying the envelope with something like Bill's irritable impatience.

Brick tore it open, and found within another envelope, the inner one of yellow. "It's a telegraph," he said uneasily. "Lahoma had telegraphed to the end of the wire, and at Chickasha they puts it in the white wrapper and sends it on. Do you see?"

"I don't see anything yet," snapped Bill. "Rip 'er open!"

Brick looked at Bill Atkins. "Better set down, Bill," he remarked. "If they's any kind of shock in this, *you* ain't got no nerve to stand it." He broke open the yellow envelope and stared at the message. As he did so, the hand clutching the telegram hardened to a giant fist, while his brow wrinkled, and his eyes grew dark and menacing. Wilfred was reminded of the sinister expression displayed at the first mention by Lahoma of Gledware's name, and he experienced once more that surprised feeling of not being nearly so well acquainted with him as he had supposed.

After a dead silence, Willock handed the telegram to Bill, who wrinkled his brow over it a minute or two before handing it to Wilfred. The young man read it hastily, then turned to Bill. His face wore a decidedly puzzled look.

"I don't understand," he said.

"Neither do I," returned Bill rather blankly. "I guess if there is to be any setting down, it's Brick that needs a chair."

The telegram was as follows:

"The second you get this, hide for your life.

Red Kimball says he can prove everything. Will explain in letter.

"LAHOMA."

"Don't say nothing to me for a spell," growled Brick, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets. "I've got to think mighty quick." He strode toward the dugout, leaving Wilfred and Bill staring at each other, speechless.

In a short time, Willock reappeared, bringing from the dugout his favorite gun. "Come along," he bade them briefly. When he had ascended the rounded swell of Turtle Hill, he stretched himself between two wide flat rocks and lay with his face and gun directed toward the opening of the cove.

"Now, Bill," he said sharply, "if you will just set facing me with your eye on the north wall, so you can tell if anybody tries to sneak over the mountain-top, I'll make matters clear. Wilfred, you can go or stay, free as air, only *if* you stay, I can't promise but you may see a man killed — me, or Red Kimball, I don't know which, though naturally I has my preference," he added, his harsh voice suddenly changing to the accent of comradeship. "As to Bill, he ain't got no choice. He come and put up with me and Lahoma when nobody

didn't want him, and now, in time of danger, I 'low to get all the help out of him that's there in spite of a begrudging disposition and the ravages of time."

"What I want to know is this," Bill interrupted: "Who and what is this Red Kimball? And if you have to hide from him, why ain't you doing it?"

"I puts it this way, Bill: that the telegram traveled faster than old Red could, so no need to hide till to-night, though when you deals with Red, it behooves you to have your gun ready against chances. You want to know about Red Kimball? But I think I'd best wait till Lahoma's letter comes, so my story can tally with hers. I got my reasons for not wanting to tell all about Red Kimball which I reckon he wouldn't be grateful for, but that's for him to say. So I 'lows to tell only as much as I has to tell, that depending on what Lahoma has picked up, according."

"I suppose you've met him face to face?" growled Bill.

"They don't seem to be no harm in that question, Bill, but you never knows where a first question is leading you. If I refuses to answer what seems fair and square, no suspicions is roused when I refuses to answer what might sound dark and shady.

So I banks myself against my general resolution to say nothing beyond Lahoma's word."

"Her word says he can prove everything. What is 'everything'?"

"That's what we'll learn from her letter. We'll just watch him do his proving!"

"And her word says to hide this minute."

"I don't do my hiding in daylight, but when it's good and dark, I'm going to put out. I would tell you the hiding-place, for I trusts you both — but if you knowed where it was, and if officers of the law come to you for information, you'd be in a box; I know you wouldn't give me up, but neither would you swear to a lie. Not knowing where I hides, your consciences are as free as mine that hasn't never been bridled."

Wilfred asked, "But when Lahoma writes, how will you get her letter?"

"You or Bill will go for the mail. If a letter comes, you'll take it to that crevice into which Miss Sellimer was drug by that big Injun, and you'll wait in there till I comes, not opening that letter till I am with you. We'll read it together, down in the hollow where poor Miss Sellimer's life was saved by Lahoma; then you two will go back to the cove, and leave me to sneak away to my hiding-

place which may be near and may be far. When you get a letter, bring your ladder and the lantern, and be sure nobody is watching you — because if you let Red Kimball or any of his gang follow you to that hiding-place, you'd have to see a man killed — and such as that ain't no sight for eyes as civilized as Wilfred's, or as old as Bill's."

CHAPTER XVI

THE ONYX PIN

WHEN the next letter came from Lahoma, Wilfred Compton and Bill Atkins hurried to the crevice in the mountain-top according to agreement. It was a cloudless afternoon, but at the farther end of the retreat the light of the lantern was necessary for its perusal. Brick Willock, who was there before them, read the letter in silence before handing it to the young man to read aloud.

"It's just addressed to me, this time," he remarked grimly, in explanation of his proprietary act; "they ain't no foolishness of 'Dear Brick and Bill.' But I treats you as friends should be treated, and lays before you everything Lahoma has found out. For Brick Willock, he says 'Friends is better friends when they don't know all about each other,' says he; and I tells you only what Lahoma has been told, according."

Wilfred took the letter, tingling with excitement. The strained watching and waiting for the sudden appearance of an unknown Red Kimball had made

his bed in the cabin as sleepless as had been Bill's pallet in the dugout. They squatted about the lantern that rested on the stone floor, Willock always with eyes directed toward the narrow slit in the ceiling that they might not be taken by surprise.

The long natural corridor was bare, except for the old Spanish sword hanging upon the wall. A stout cedar post, firmly fixed in the extremity of the walls, formed a rude barricade against the abyss of unknown depth that yawned a few yards away from where they sat. This railing and the sword were the only evidences of man's possession, save for the ladder that would presently be carried back to the cove. No inquiries were made as to how Brick came and went, where he found food and a bed, or how he happened to be present at the precise moment of the arrival of the bearers of news.

"Dear Brick," Lahoma began: "By this time you have hidden where nobody can find you, for you've got my telegram and you know I wouldn't have sent it if it hadn't been necessary. You believe in me, and, as you would say,— how I'd love to hear you! — you act 'according.' Well, and I believe in you, Brick, and you needn't imagine as long as you live that anybody could make me think you anything but what I know you to be, the kindest,

most tender-hearted, most thoughtful man that ever lived. Get that fixed in your mind so when I tell what they say about you, you won't care, knowing I'm with you and will believe in you till death.

"I'm going to skip everything except the part about you, for this letter goes by next mail. There's ever and ever so many other things I'd love to tell you, and I don't see how I can wait, but I'm going to find out, for wait I must. Maybe I ought to begin with Mr. Gledware so you'll know more about him when I begin on the main news.

"We are at his house now and the house-party is in full swing. Mr. Gledware is pressing his suit to Annabel with all his might, and her mother is helping him. Nothing stands in the way — for she wants to marry him — except her love for Mr. Edgerton Compton. She told me all about her old romance with Wilfred — you remember him, I guess? She got to liking Edgerton after Wilfred went away because he looked so much like Wilfred. Maybe he does, but he isn't the same kind of man. Mr. Edgerton has spent all his money on fixing up the outside of the house, but Wilfred has spent his on the furnishings. Well! If Annabel could change her heart from one brother to the other just because Edgerton reminded her of Wilfred, I guess

she won't have a very hard time making another transfer, especially as Mr. Gledware is traveling her way. When I love anybody, my love is the part of me that comes alive whenever that person is present, or is mentioned. So how could I slide it from one man to another, any more than the man himself could change to another man? And that's the way I love you, Brick, and not all the wealth or fame or good looks in the world (and you have neither) could get my heart away from *you!*

"Or from Bill.

"The first time I met Mr. Gledware, he acted in a curious way. Of course I was introduced as 'Miss Willock' and he started at the name, and at sight of me — two separate little movements just as plain as anything. Then he said he had heard the name 'Willock' in unusual surroundings, and that my face reminded him of somebody who was dead. That was all there was to it, then. But afterward he heard Annabel call me 'Lahoma,' and his face turned perfectly white.

"The first chance he had, after that, he sat down to talk to me in a corner where we wouldn't be overhead, and he asked me questions. So, of course, I told about father and mother taking me across the prairie to the Oklahoma country, and how

"Dear Brick," Lahoma began

mother died and father was killed, and I was with the Indians a while and then was taken to live with my cousin, Brick. He listened with his head down, never meeting my eye, and when I had finished all he said was, 'Did you ever hear my name before?'

"And I said I never had. Then he asked if I thought I had ever seen him, for he thought he could remember having seem *me* somewhere. And I said I wasn't sure, I had met so many people, and there was something familiar about him. Then he said he guessed we hadn't ever met unless accidentally on the trail somewhere, as he had once been down in Texas,— and that was all.

"I don't like Mr. Gledware's eye because it always looks away from you. He would be considered a handsome man by anybody not particular about eyes. Afterward, I heard about his trip to Texas. Annabel and her mother were talking about Mr. Gledware's past. It seems that once Mr. Gledware and his first wife (I say his *first* because I look upon Annabel as certain to be the second) joined the Oklahoma boomers and they were attacked by Indians, just as *my* father and mother were, and they had with them his wife's little girl, for he had married a widow, just as *my* father had (my stepfather) and there was a terrible

battle. And Mr. Gledware, oh, he was *so* brave! He killed ten Indians after the rest of his party, including his wife and daughter, had been slain, and he broke through the attacking party and escaped on a horse — the only one that got away.

"He doesn't look *that* brave. Later, I asked him if it could be possible that he was with the wagon-train we were in, but he said there wasn't any Mr. or Mrs. Willock in his party, and no little girl named Lahoma Willock. But he's been through what my father went through, and it made me feel kinder to him, somehow.

"But his eye is bad. Maybe it got in the habit of shifting about looking for Indians in the sage-brush. Sometimes he seems still to be looking for Indians. Well, I see where's he's right there, and I'm going to tell you why, which brings me to the biggest news yet.

"Now I've come to the day when I sent you the telegram, and why I sent it, so be prepared! There was to be a big picnic, to-day, near a town called Independence, and, as it happened, I didn't feel like going, so begged off — let me tell you why: I began a novel, last night, full of bright conversation, the pages all broken up in little scraps of print that hurry you along as if building steps for you to

run down — it was ever and ever more interesting than real people can be. It was a story about a house-party and the writer just made them talk to suit himself and not to suit their dulness as a real house-party must, you know. So I stayed to finish that book. Oh, of course if I had had a lover to be with! But that's something I'll never have, I suppose; but I don't complain, Brick, for you've given me everything else I ever wanted.

"The reason I would like to have a lover is as follows: So I would understand the experience of being regarded that way. It would be like plowing up the sage-brush to plant kafir-corn and millo-maize, because until such time, there is bound to be a part of my nature unworked.

"Now, there is a nook in Mr. Gledware's library, a sort of alcove where you have a window all to yourself but are shut off from the rest of the room, and that is where I was when two men came in softly and closed and locked the door behind them. I couldn't see them but just as I was starting up to find out what it meant, one of them — it was Mr. Gledware, which surprised me greatly as he had gone with the rest to the picnic — spoke your name, Brick. As soon as I heard that name, and particularly on account of the way he spoke it, I determined

to 'lay low' and scout out the trouble. So I just drew up as small as possible in my chair, as you would slip along through the high grass if Indians were near, and I listened. Maybe if I had finished my civilization I would have been obliged to let them know I was there; but fortunately, I haven't reached the limit, yet.

"The other man, I soon found, was Red Kimball; they had about finished their conversation before coming into the room, so the first part was lost. Mr. Gledware had come for his check-book, and the check was for Red Kimball. Red Kimball used to be the leader of a band of highwaymen up in Cimarron, when it was No-Man's Land; it was his band that attacked the wagon-train when Mr. Gledware acted the hero — only, as they were disguised as Indians, Mr. Gledware didn't know they were such till later. He came on them, afterward, without their disguises, and they would have killed him if *you,* Brick, hadn't knocked down Red, and shot his brother! So, as I listened, I found out that Mr. Gledware wasn't the hero he claimed to be, but was *the man you saved;* and he is *my stepfather;* and I was carried away *by him,* and taken *from him* by the Indians; but he wasn't killed at all. And my name, I suppose is Lahoma *Gledware,* at least not as Red

Feather had taught me, "Lahoma *Willock*." And I am *no* kin to you, at all, Brick, you just took me in and cared for me because you *are* Brick Willock, the dearest tenderest friend a little girl ever had — and these lines are crooked because there are tears — because you are not my cousin.

"I'd rather be kin to you than married to a prince.

"Red Kimball says you were one of his gang of highwaymen but I know it *isn't true,* so you don't have to say *a word.* But he is determined to be revenged on you for killing his brother. And the reason he's waited this long is because he didn't know where you were — good reason, isn't it? Tell you how he found out — it all comes from my getting civilized! He's a porter at our Kansas City hotel. So when he heard the men talking about how I had once been kidnaped by the Indians, and wrote nearly every day to my cousin Brick Willock, which they thought an odd name — he guessed the rest.

"It makes my blood turn cold to think that all the time we were living quietly and happily in the cove, that awful Red Kimball was hunting for you, meaning to have your life — and in a way that I'm ashamed to write, but must, so you'll know every-

thing. He means to have you arrested and tried for his brother's murder — and he says *he can hang you!*

"And Mr. Gledware is his witness. That's why Red has come after him. You'll think it strange that after his gang were about to kill Mr. Gledware in the prairie, that he should come to ask *him* to act as witness against another man. That's what Mr. Gledware told him. But Red Kimball answered that it was all a bluff — they had never dreamed of shooting him or his little girl.

"When No-Man's Land was added to Oklahoma, a pardon was offered to Red Kimball and all his gang if they would come in and lay down their arms and swear to keep the peace — you see, most of their crimes had been committed where no courts could touch them. Well, all the gang came in — But what do you think? That terrible Red Kimball swears that *you were one of his gang,* and that as you didn't come in and surrender yourself, *the pardon doesn't apply to you!* It was all I could do to keep from stepping right out and telling him you were one of the most peaceable and harmless of men and that you just *happened* to be riding about when you saw Mr. Gledware's danger, and just *had* to shoot Kansas Kimball to save me and my stepfather.

You, a highwayman, indeed! I could laugh at that, if it didn't make me too mad when I think about it.

"Then Mr. Gledware talked. He said maybe it was a bluff against him, that standing him up against the moon to be shot at, but it wasn't one he was apt to forget, and he could never be on any kind of terms with Red; besides, he said, if Brick Willock hadn't saved his life, he'd always thought so, so wouldn't witness against him though he had no doubt he belonged to Red's gang. But that was nothing to *him*. And he couldn't understand how Red could have the face to come to him about *anything*, but was willing to pay a sum to keep all the past hushed up, as he didn't want any 'complications' from being claimed as a stepfather by Lahoma! The past was over, he said, and Lahoma had a home of her own, and he was satisfied to be free of her — and he would pay Red something to keep the past buried.

"Then Red spoke pretty ugly, saying it wasn't the past he was anxious to have buried, but Brick Willock. And he said that Mr. Gledware was a witness to the murder, whether he wanted to be or not, and Red was willing to confess to everything, in order to have Brick hanged.

"Then Mr. Gledware, in a cold unmoved voice,

said he must go back to the picnic and 'Mr. Kimball' could do as he pleased.

"But that wasn't the end. 'Do you know,' says 'Mr. Kimball,' 'that Red Feather is in town, laying for you?' he says. Mr. Gledware gave a dreadful kind of low scream, such as turned me sick to hear. It reminded me of the cry of a coyote I heard once, caught in the trap, that saw Bill coming with his knife. The room was as still as death for a little while. I guess they were looking at each other.

"At last Red says, pretty slow and calm, 'Would you like to have that Indian out of the way?' Mr. Gledware didn't answer, at least not anything I could hear, but his eyes must have spoken for him, for Red went on after a while — 'It's a go, then, is it? Well, that'll take time — but in a few days — maybe in a few hours — I'll deal with the chief. And I want your word that after that's accomplished, you'll go with me to Greer County and stay on the job till Brick Willock swings.'"

"There was a longer silence than before. It lasted so long, and the room was so still, that after a while I almost imagined that they were gone, or that I had just waked up from a dreadful dream. My nerves all clashed in the strangest way — like the shivering of morning ice on a pool — when Mr.

Gledware's voice jarred on my ears. He said, 'How will I know?'

"'Well,' says Red Kimball roughly, 'how *would* you know?'

"There was another of those awful silences. Then Mr. Gledware said, 'When you bring me a pin that he always carries about him, I'll know that Red Feather will never trouble me again.'

"Kimball spoke rougher than before: 'You mean it'll show you that he's a dead 'un, huh?"

"'I mean what I said,' Mr. Gledware snapped, as if just rousing himself from a kind of stupor.

"'Well, what kind of pin?' That was Kimball's question.

"Then Mr. Gledware described the pin. He said it was a smooth-faced gold-rimmed pin of onyx set with pearls. And Kimball said boastingly that he would produce that pin, as he was a living man. And Mr. Gledware told him if he did, he'd go to witness against Brick Willock. So both left the room, and pretty soon, from the window, I saw them going away on horseback, in opposite directions.

"I mustn't hold back this letter to add any more, it must get off by the mail that's nearly due. The moment I learn anything new I'll write again. Of

course I know you're no more a highwayman than myself, but since it's true that you *did* shoot Red's brother, and since he evidently died of the wound, I suppose Red could cause you a great deal of trouble. You could swear that if you hadn't killed Kansas Kimball, he would have killed my step-father; and that they had ordered you to kill me, in my sleep. The trouble is that Mr. Gledware seems to be in terror about Red Feather, and if Kimball gets him rid of the Indian, I'm not sure that Mr. Gledware would tell the whole truth. It might be the word of those two against yours. It's certain that if they tried you and failed to convict, Kimball would try a knife or a gun as the next best way of getting even.

"My poor dear Brick, it seems that there's long trouble before you, but the consciousness of innocence will uphold you, and just as soon as I do all I can at this end of the trail, by acting as your faithful scout, I'll come out in the open in my war clothes with my belt well-lined with weapons, and we'll defy the world. In the meantime — better keep hid! Good-by. Think of me when the wild winds blow.

"Your little girl,

"LAHOMA.

"P. S. Tell Bill he can still claim his share.

"P. P. S. Got Bill's note of a few lines, read it with the greatest joy in the world, and guessed at the news. He says Wilfred Compton is there. What for?

"L."

CHAPTER XVII

BRICK MAKES A STAND

AS soon as Wilfred had finished the letter, not without a wry smile over the query concerning himself, Bill Atkins exclaimed:

"*Then!* Ho! And so she's no more kin to you, Brick, than to me; and her name's no more Willock than Atkins — and being but a stepdaughter to old Sneak, neither is it Gledware. Yet you have everlastingly had your own say about Lahoma, from claiming to be a cousin! I want you to know from this on that I claim as big a share in Lahoma as anybody else on this green and living earth."

Wilfred looked up, expecting Brick to consent to this on the ground that in all likelihood Bill's claim would last but a few years, anyway. It seemed too good an opening for Brick to lose; but instead of refreshing himself with his customary gibe, the huge fellow sat dark and glowering, his eyes staring upward at the crevice in the rock roof, the lantern-light showing his forehead deeply rutted in a threatening scowl.

"Another point needs clearing up," Bill said sharply. "What about Red Kimball's charge? *Did* you belong to his gang? *Are* you a highwayman?"

Brick waved impatiently toward the letter that still gleamed in the young man's hand. "We goes on document'ry evidence," he said. "I takes a bold and open stand on the general plea of 'Not guilty' to nothing. That's technical, and it's arbitrary. Should you be asked had I ever expressed an opinion as to being a highwayman, or a lowwayman, you can report me as saying 'Not guilty,' according."

"Brick," interposed Wilfred, returning him the letter, "you're making a mistake not to trust us with the whole truth. If you wait for Lahoma's letters and only admit what she discovers, Bill and I can't form any plan of protecting you. While her information is coming, bit by bit, the man who wants you hanged is liable to show up —"

"Let 'im come!" growled Brick. "He can't get no closer to me than I'll be to him. I'm not going to air my past history. What Lahoma finds out, I admits frank and open; otherwise I stands firm as not guilty, being on safe ground, technical and arbitrary."

"But if Red Kimball brings the sheriff — it's only

a matter of time — your plea of not guilty won't save you from arrest. And he'll have any number of rascals to prove what he pleases, whether it's the truth or not. If Gledware comes as a witness, his position will give him great influence against you — and the fact that he'd testify after you'd saved his life, would make a pretty hard hit with the jury."

"Jury nothing!" retorted Brick. "This case ain't never going to a jury. Such things is settled man to man, in these parts."

"But as surely as the sheriff serves his writ, you'll be landed in jail. And I happen to know the sheriff; he's a man that couldn't be turned from his duty — good friend of mine, too."

"Is, eh? Then you'd better advise with him for his good."

"Think of Lahoma. If you killed a man — whether the sheriff, or this Red Kimball — Lahoma could never feel toward you as she does to-day."

"And how would she feel toward me if I was hanged, uh? I guess she'd druther I laid my man low than that I swung high." Willock started up impatiently. "We're wasting words," he said, roughly. "There is but the two alternatives: I'm one of 'em, and Red Kimball is the other. It's

simply a question of which gets which. I tries to make it plain, for there's no going back. Now are you with me, or not? If not, I'll fight it out along as I always done in times past and gone — and bedinged to 'em! I'm sorry my young days was as they was, and for Lahoma's sake I'd cut off this right arm —" he held it out, rigidly —" if that'd change the past. But the past — and bedinged *to* it! — can't be changed. It's there, right over your shoulder, out of reach. This mountain might as well say, 'I don't like being a big chunk of granite where all the rest of the country is a smooth prairie; I'm sorry I erupted; and I guess I'll go back into the heart of the earth where I come from.' A mountain that's erupted is erupted till kingdom come, and a man that's did a deed, has did it till the stars fall. But you *can* imagine this mountain saying, with some sense, too, 'Now, since I *has* erupted, I'll do my best to cover my nakedness with pretty cedars for to stay green in season and out of season, and I'll embroider myself with flowers and grasses, and send little mountain-streams down to make soft water in people's wells so they won't all-time be fretting because I takes up so much of good plowing-land,' says the mountain. I may not be a mountain, but I've got a good top to me which

reasons against the future and forgets the past. I know Red Kimball — and now that he's learned where I live, one of us is too many, considering the hard times. I mean to keep hiding, not to be took by surprise; but I 'lows to come forth one of these days and walk about free and disposed, all danger having been removed."

"What about the law?" demanded Bill. "Do you think *it's* going to let you walk about free and disposed, after you've removed Red Kimball?"

"I hopes the law and me can get on peaceable together," returned the other grimly. "I've never had nothing to do with it, and I hopes to be let alone."

Wilfred spoke with sudden decision: "Brick, I'm with you to the end, and so is Bill. I have nothing to do with your purposes or plans except to offer the best advice I know — you've rejected it, but I'm with you just the same. It strikes me I can help you by going to Kansas City — for you need only Bill in the cove,—he can bring you Lahoma's letters. I'll hurry to Lahoma; and if she decides to come back, as I'm sure she will very soon — well, she'll need a protector. I'll bring her home. She asks in her letter what I'm here for. Wouldn't that be a good answer?"

Brick Willock laid his hand on the other's shoulder and stared into his face with troubled eyes. Gradually his countenance cleared and something of his old geniality returned. "A first-class answer, son! I believe you'll do it." He grasped Wilfred's hand. "These are troublous times, and it's good to feel a hand like this that's steady and true. Now I ain't going to drag you into nothing that could hurt you nor Bill, or make you feel sore over past days. I don't need nobody to lean on — but Lahoma does; and if Red Kimball pops it to me before I get a chance to keel him over, you two must look out for her."

"I'll look out for her myself, single-handed," said Bill gruffly.

"I know you would, old tap, as long as you lasts," said Willock with an unwonted note of gentleness. Bill was so embarrassed by the tone that he cringed awkwardly. After a pause, Willock suggested that Wilfred wait for one more letter from Lahoma, provided it come within the next twenty-four hours, then start up the trail for Chickasha and board the train for Kansas. "She might write something that needed instant work," he explained. "If so, I'd like to have you here. I'm looking for developments in her next letter."

"Strange to me," muttered Bill, "about Red Feather and that sneaking Gledware. Wonder how came the Indian with a pin on him that Gledware knew of?"

Willock's face was twisted into a sardonic grin. "Guess I could explain that, all right — but I says nothing beyond Lahoma's word. I banks on document'ry proofs, and otherwise stands technical and arbitrary."

Hitherto Wilfred, as guest of honor, had been offered the cabin as his sleeping-quarters, and he had accepted it because of the countless reminders of Lahoma's fresh and innocent life; but this night, he shared the dugout with Bill, from a sense of impending danger. Until a late hour they sat over the glowing coals, discussing their present situation and offering conjectures about Willock's younger days. There could hardly have been a stronger contrast between the emaciated old man of the huge white mustache, thin reddish cheeks and shock of white hair, and the broad-shouldered, handsome and erect young man — or the stern and gloomy countenance of the former, and the expressive eyes and flexible lips of Wilfred. Yet they seemed unconscious of any chasm of age or disposition as they spoke in low tones, not without frequent glances

toward the barricaded door and the heavily curtained window.

The wind made strange noises overhead and at times one could be almost certain there was the stamping of a man's foot upon the earthen roof. The distant cry of a wild beast, and the nearer yelping of hungry wolves mingled with the whistling of the wind. Sometimes Wilfred rose and, passing noiselessly to the window, raised the curtain with a quick gesture to stare out on a dark and stormy night; and once, in doing so, he surprised a pair of red eyes under bristling gray hair which seemed to glow hot as molten lead, as the fire from the open stove caught them unaware.

"If my arms were tied," remarked Bill, "I'd rather trust myself to that coyote than to Red Kimball. I hate to think of Brick out yonder on the mountain, all alone, and no fire to warm him, afraid to smoke his pipe, I reckon. Well, this kind of thing can't last long, that's plain."

It was Wilfred's conviction that "this kind of thing" could not, indeed, last long, which kept him awake half through the night; and yet, when the morning sunlight flooded the cove, it seemed impossible that deeds of violence could be committed in so peaceful a world. In that delusion, however, he

could not long remain; Lahoma's next letter came confirmatory of his worst fears.

"Just read it aloud, Wilfred," said Brick, as all gathered about the lantern in the retreat at the mountain-top. "We're all one, now, and I've got no secrets from you — at least none that's knowed to Lahoma. And if the case seems immediate, I reckon you'll prove game, son."

Wilfred nodded briefly. "My horse is ready saddled," he said, as he opened the letter addressed to Willock. "As soon as I've read 'Yours truly,' I'll be ready to jump into the saddle, so I say 'good-by' now!"

CHAPTER XVIII

LIFE ON ONE CONDITION

"DEAR Brick and Bill:

"I put Bill in, because I am sure that by this time he has been told what was in my last letter, and I know he's true blue. I have been so excited since finding out that Red Kimball is determined on revenge, and that Mr. Gledware may be a witness for him, that I can't think about anything but the danger at the cove. I feel that I ought to be there, to lend a hand; what will you do without me, if that horrible highwayman comes slipping around Turtle Hill, or creeps down the north mountain in the dead of night? And I would be on my way there, now, if I didn't hope to find out more about their plans.

"They have come back from the picnic, and I am on the watch, feeling sure Red Kimball will come again to have another talk with Mr. Gledware. But he hasn't come yet, and everything is quiet and peaceable, as if things were going along as things always do and always will — it makes me dreadfully nerv-

ous! So, as it seemed that nothing was going to happen, I decided to stir up something myself. When there's no news, why not make some of your own? I made some.

"This is the same day I overheard that plot in the library, but it is night. When it was good and dark, Annabel came up to my room where I was watching the road from my window, and she sat down and began talking about the picnic and what a fine time she had had, with a good deal about going to Europe. She was all flushed and running over with talk, and after a while it came clear that she's just been engaged to Mr. Gledware.

"It seemed to me it would be like fighting behind bushes to tell her what I thought of Mr. Gledware, while under his roof and at his expense, so I opened up matters by talking about Wilfred Compton. I told her how faithful and true Wilfred has been to her all these years, carrying her letters next to his heart, and dreaming of her night and day, and how he came to see me, once, because it had been two years since he'd seen a sure-enough girl, and how I tried to interest him as hard as I could, but he never wanted to come back because his heart belonged to Annabel.

"After a while she began to cry, but it wasn't over

Wilfred, it was over Edgerton. When Wilfred went away to be a cowboy she lost interest and sympathy in him because she doesn't understand cowboys; they are not in her imagination. But his brother Edgerton has always been a city man in nice clothes with pleasing manners, and if he had money — But what's the use talking? Seems like that's the worst waste of time there can be, and the most aggravating, to say if so-and-so had money! Because if he hasn't got it, somebody else has, and if you think money's more than the man, there you are. And Mr. Gledware has it. He's not the man but he has the money.

"Then I expressed myself. You know what I think. So does Annabel, now. That's how I made me some news, when there wasn't any. The news is, that Annabel will never forgive me, and as I'm here solely as her guest, my guesting-time will be brief — just long enough to find out what Mr. Gledware decides to do. I oughtn't to have told Annabel that she was mercenary, or that Mr. Gledware was as hard as a stone and as old as M—— (I'm not sure how to spell him, but you remember: the oldest man). Yes, I know I oughtn't. If a woman can marry a man when she doesn't love him, it won't change her purpose to know what *you* think

about it, because her own feelings are the biggest things that could stand in the way.

"But I told her, anyway. Seemed like everything in me turned to words and poured out without my having to keep it going. I just stood there and watched myself say things. You see, Annabel is so dainty and pretty, and naturally so sweet — and Mr. Gledware — well, he *isn't*. The more I thought of that, and the better I remembered poor Wilfred pining away for her in the desert, and not coming back to see me because he couldn't get *her* out of his brain, and how she changed from him to his brother, and from Mr. Edgerton to Mr. Gledware, I was ashamed of her, and sorry for her, and angry with her.

"I wish I hadn't said anything. But I felt glorious at the time, just like a storm sweeping across the prairie, purifying the air and not caring whether the earth wants to be purified or not. I did wrong, because I came to the big world to study people of culture and refinement, not to quarrel with them. You must have money, you *must* have money, you *must* have money, if you're civilized. I don't care if I *am* a little storm. Yes, of course, I know a storm isn't a civilized thing. Well, I know what I'm going to do,— I'm going to come back and blow

the rest of my life right there in the cove, with my Brick and my Bill.

"So that's my news, that I'm dissatisfied with the big world. It isn't like I'd have made it, that's the truth! Now I'll lay this letter aside to cool (I mean *it,* and *me,* too) and I'll not send it until something about Red Kimball happens, so you'll be posted on what really matters. After all, people that marry for money aren't important, they don't belong to big affairs — but there's something worth discussing in a plot to commit murder. That *means* something; as Brick would say, it's 'vital.' These people about me, kind, gentle, correct,— all their waking thoughts are devoted to little things — fashionable trifles that last no longer than the hour in which they're born — just time-killers. I enjoy these pleasing trifles, but my eyes are opened and I know they *are* trifles. These people's eyes are not opened. Why? Because they haven't lived in the West, neighboring with real things like alkali plains and sand-storms and granite mountains.

"My! but it would open their eyes if one of their dearest friends was in danger of getting himself hanged! Something permanent in *that!*

"LATER: This is midnight. I expect to leave as soon as I possibly can, but probably this letter

will get away first, so here's something new to put your mind on; it's rather dreadful, when you give it a calm thought. But my thoughts are not calm. Far from it. Oh, how excited I was! But I guess *they* didn't know it. It all happened about an hour ago, and you can see that my hand is still a little shaky.

"There was a bright moonlight, but you needn't be afraid I'm going to talk about *that;* this isn't any tale about moons. I was sitting at my window because I couldn't sleep, not that I expected to see anything unusual. There's a big summer-house at the far end of the lawn, all covered with vines, and there's a walk between dense shrubbery, leading to it from the house. I guess that's why I didn't see anybody go to that summer-house. The first thing I *did* see was Red Kimball come out and slip through a little side-gate, and hurry along the country road. As soon as I saw him, I guessed that he and Mr. Gledware had been conspiring in the summer-house. What a chance I had missed to act the good scout!

"But it seemed no use to go down, after Red Kimball had left. If Mr. Gledware was still in the summer-house, I knew he was alone; and if he'd returned to the house, all was over for the night. I was wondering what new plot they had formed, and

how I was to find out about it, when my eye was caught by a movement in the hedge that runs down to the side-gate. The movement was as slight as possible, but as there wasn't *any* breeze, it made me shiver a little, for I knew somebody was skulking there. I watched, and pretty soon something passed through the gate, light and quick and stealthy, like the shadow of a cloud. Only, there wasn't any cloud; and in the flash of moonlight I saw it was our old friend — Red Feather.

"Almost as soon as I recognized him, he had disappeared behind a large lilac-bush; but I had seen what he held in the hand behind his back — it was a long unsheathed knife. The lilac-bush stood close to the summer-house. He fell flat to the ground, and though I couldn't see him, after that I knew he was wriggling his way around the bush. You would have been ashamed of me for a minute or two, for I kept sitting beside the window as if I had been turned to a statue of ice. I felt just that cold, too!

"But maybe I didn't stay there as long as it seemed. First thing I knew, I was running downstairs as lightly and swiftly as I could, and out through the door at the end of the side hall that had been left wide open — and I was at the summer-

house door like a flash. There was a wide path of moonlight across the concrete floor and right in that glare was a sight never to be forgotten — Red Feather, about to stab Mr. Gledware to the heart! He held Mr. Gledware by the throat with one hand, and his other hand held the knife up for the blow. Mr. Gledware lay on his back, and Red Feather had one knee pressed upon his breast. In the light, Mr. Gledware's face was purple and dreadfully distorted, but the Indian looked about as usual — just serious and unchangeable.

"When I reached the doorway, I blotted out most of the moonlight, and I drew back so Red Feather could see who I was. He looked up and let go of Mr. Gledware's throat, but didn't move, otherwise. '*Red Feather!*' I said. '*Give me that knife.*'

"Mr. Gledware, recognizing my voice, tried to entreat me to save him, but he was half-strangled, and only made sounds that turned me faint, to know that the man my mother had married was such a coward.

"Red Feather told me that if I came any nearer, or if I cried for help, he would murder that man and escape; but that if I would step into the shadow and listen, he'd give his reason for doing it before it was done. So I went across the room from him to save

time, hoping I could persuade him to change his mind. I stood in the shadow, and in a low voice, I reminded him of his kindness to me, and of our kindness to him, and I begged for Mr. Gledware's life.

"Red Feather asked me if I knew Mr. Gledware was my stepfather, yet hadn't acknowledged it to me. I said yes. He asked me if I didn't know Mr. Gledware had kept still about it because he didn't want the trouble and expense of taking care of me. I said, of course I had thought of that. He asked if I knew he had deserted my mother's dead body in the desert to save his miserable life. I said I knew that, but he had taken me with him, and he had tried to save me, and I was going to save him.

"Red Feather shook his head. No, he said, I could not save him, for he would be dead in two or three minutes — and then he bent over Mr. Gledware, who all this time was afraid to move or to make a sound. I hurried to remind him that he hadn't told me his reason for wanting to kill the man.

"Then Red Feather said that when that man rode with me among the Indians, Red Feather's daughter had taken a fancy to him, and Mr. Gledware had married her; and I had been kept away from him so

he'd forget me and not turn his thoughts toward his own people; and they had taught me that my name was Willock because they were going to take me to you, Brick. Isn't it wonderful? That day you found the deserted wagon, and buried my mother, Red Feather was watching you from the mountain and he wouldn't kill you because you made that grave and knelt down to talk to the Great Spirit. Afterward, when he rode home and found that his daughter and Mr. Gledware were to be married, he made up his mind that if you succeeded in keeping hidden from Red Kimball and his band, you would be the one to take care of me. And when two years had passed and you were still safe, he brought me to you! What a glad day that was!

"When Red Feather's daughter wanted Mr. Gledware's life saved, it was so. And Red Feather gave them a great stretch of land, and Mr. Gledware got to be important in the tribe; he made himself one of them, and they thought him greater than their own chief. At the end of a few years, there was the great agitation over the boomers coming to the Oklahoma country, and much talk of the land being thrown open. The Indians didn't want it done, and they joined together to send some one to Washington to address congress on the subject.

Mr. Gledware was such an orator that they thought him irresistible, so they selected him, and, for his fee, they collected over fifty thousand dollars. Think of it!

"Of course he didn't go near Washington. It was the time of Kansas City's great boom. He went there and bought up city lots, and sold out at the right time, and that's why he's rich to-day. In the meantime, the Indians didn't know what had become of him, and Red Feather's daughter died from shame over her desertion — just pined away and hid herself from her people till she was starved to death. That's why Red Feather meant to kill Mr. Gledware.

"When he had finished, Red Feather bent over Mr. Gledware and said to him, 'Me speak all true? Tell Lahoma — me speak all true?'

"And the man whispered feebly, 'It is all true — don't kill me, for God's sake, don't kill me — save me, Lahoma, *my child!*'

"I begged him not to kill the man. Red Feather said to me, 'You hear how he treat my daughter! You my friend, Lahoma. You know all that, and yet you tell me not kill him?'

"'I say not kill him.'

"'Then you hate my daughter?'

"'My mother could marry him, Red Feather, and I can beg for his life.'

"He shook his head. 'No, Lahoma, he die; he leave my daughter to die and this hand do to him what he do to her.'

"I never felt so helpless, so horribly weak and useless! There I was, only a few yards away, and the man was my stepfather; and his enemy was our friend. And not far away stood the man's big house filled with guests — among them strong men who could have overpowered dozens of Indians. But what could I do?

"Then I had a thought. 'Let him live, Red Feather,' I said, 'but strip him of all his ill-gotten property. Turn him loose in the world without a penny; it'll be punishment enough. You can't bring back your daughter by killing him; but you can make him give up all he has in return for stealing the money from your tribe.'

"I don't know why I thought of that, and I don't know why it made instant appeal to Red Feather's mind. I saw at once that he was going to consent. All he said was, 'Talk to him —' But I knew what he meant.

"So I crossed the room and looked down at the man. 'Mr. Gledware,' I said, 'are you willing to

give up all your possessions in order to save your life?'

"'Oh, yes,' he gasped. 'A thousand times, yes! God bless you, Lahoma!'

"'You will deed all your property away from you? And surrender all that you own, money, bonds, stocks and so forth?'

"'My God, yes, yes!' he wailed. 'Save me — only save me, Lahoma!'

"I looked at Red Feather. 'Shall he make it all over to you?'

"Red Feather shook his head. 'Me not want his money. Let him give all to Red Flower, the daughter him not see since he stole our money and desert his wife.'

"'Yes, yes, yes,' moaned Mr. Gledware, 'I'll give everything to her — I'll make over everything to her in the morning, so help me God! — if you spare my life, she shall have everything.'

"All this time Red Feather had never moved his knee from the man's breast. Now he rose and pointed toward the East. 'The morning will come,' he said solemnly. 'If you keep your word — well! If you try fool Red Feather — if you keep back one piece of money, one clod of earth —' He wheeled about so suddenly with his drawn knife that

I thought he was plunging it into the man's heart. It shot down like lightning, but stopped short just before the edge of the blade touched the miserable coward.

"Mr. Gledware sobbed and gasped and choked, swearing that he would keep his word, and assuring us that, if he broke it, death would be too good for him. But what he will do when he thinks himself safe — that's another thing! I know his life is as secure as mine, if he is true to his promise. But if he breaks it — well, we know Red Feather! Do you think Mr. Gledware will keep his word? Or will he wait to see whether or not Red Kimball rids him of the Indian? I believe he'll be afraid to wait. But as soon as he's calm, it will be like death for him to give up all he owns. That will mean giving up Annabel, too.

"It hasn't been an hour since I came back to my room. When Red Feather slipped away, the only thing I asked Mr. Gledware was my mother's maiden name, and the place where her people lived. I'm going to leave here in the morning. I'm coming back where there's room enough to turn around in, and air enough to breathe, where men speak the truth because they don't care who's who, and shoot quick and straight when they have to. I'm coming back

where money's mighty scarce and love's as free and boundless as Heaven, where good books are few and true hearts are many. Yes, I'm coming back to the West, and if the winds don't blow all the sand away, under the sand I expect to be buried. But I want to live until I'm buried. People have made the big world as it is,— well they are welcome to it; but God has made the cove as *it* is, and it's for Me and Brick and Bill.

"Good night.

"LAHOMA.

"Just the three of us: just Me and Brick and Bill: *one — two — three!* There's oceans of room out in the big world for everything and everybody. But in the cove, there's room just for

"Me

"And Brick

"And Bill."

CHAPTER XIX

LIKE LOVERS

ON reaching Chickasha, Wilfred Compton telegraphed to Kansas City asking his brother if Lahoma was still at Mr. Gledware's house in the country. In the course of a few hours the reply came that she had already started home to Greer County, Texas. After reading the message, Wilfred haunted the station, not willing to let even the most unpromising freight train escape observation.

Everything that came down the track on this last reach of the railroad into Southwest Oklahoma, was crowded with people, cattle, household furniture, stores of hardware, groceries, dry-goods — all that man requires for his physical well-being. The town itself was swarming with eager jostling throngs bound for many diverse points, and friends of a day shouted hearty good-bys, or exchanged good-natured badinage, as they separated to meet no more.

Men on horseback leading heavily laden packhorses, covered wagons from which peeped women

and children half-reclining upon bedding, their eyes filled with grave wonder at a world so unlike their homes in the East or North — pyramids of undressed lumber fastened somehow upon four wheels and surmounted in precarious fashion by sprawling men whose faces and garments suggested Broadway, New York and Leadville, Colorado — Wilfred gazed upon the unending panorama. In those corded tents he saw the pioneer family already in possession of the new land; in the stacks of pine boards he beheld houses already sending up the smoke of peace and prosperity from their chimneys; and in the men and women who streamed by, their faces alight with hope, their bodies ready for the grapple with drought, flood, cyclone, famine, he saw the guaranty of a young and dominant state.

Strangers greeted one another with easy comradeship. Sometimes it was just, "Hello, neighbor!" — and if a warning were shouted across the street to one endangered by the current of swelling life, it might be —"Look out there, brother!" The sense of kinship tingled in the air, opening men's hearts and supplying aid to weaker brethren. Those who gathered along the track awaiting the arrival of the trains had already the air of old-timers, eager to extend the hospitality of a well-loved land.

In such a crowd Wilfred was standing when he first caught sight of Lahoma among those descending to the jostling platform. He had not known how she would look, and certainly she was much changed from the girl of fifteen, but he made his way to her side without the slightest hesitation.

"Lahoma!"

She turned sharply with a certain ease of movement suggesting fearless freedom. Her eyes looked straight into the young man's with penetrating keenness which instantly softened to pleasure. "Why! how glad I am to see you!" she cried, giving him her hand as they withdrew from the rush. "But how did you know me?"

"How did *you* know?" he returned, pleased and thrilled by her glowing brown hair, her eloquent eyes, her warm-tinted cheeks, her form, as erect as of yore, but not so thin — as pleased and thrilled as if all these belonged to him. "How did you know *me?*" he repeated, looking and looking, as if he would never be able to believe that she had turned out so much better than he had ever dreamed she would.

"Oh," said Lahoma, "when I looked into your face, I saw myself as a girl sitting under the cedar trees in the cove, with Brick and Bill."

"Just you three?" demanded Wilfred wistfully, — also smilingly.

"Oho!" exclaimed Lahoma, showing her perfect little teeth as if about to bite, in a way that filled him with fearful joy, "and so they showed you that letter!"

"*Just* you three?" repeated Wilfred. "Just room enough in the cove for you — and Brick — and Bill?"

"Listen to me, Wilfred, and I will do the talking."

"Well?"

She lowered her voice to a whisper —"Lean your head closer."

Wilfred put down his head. "Is this close enough?" he whispered, feeling exalted. Men, women and children circled about them; the air vibrated with the shock of trunks and mail bags hurled upon the platform.

"No," said Lahoma, rising on tiptoe.

Wilfred took off his hat and got under hers.

She whispered in his ear, "Red Kimball came on this train — there he is — he hasn't seen me, yet — was in another coach."

"Well? Go on talking, Lahoma — I'd get closer if I could."

"*S-h-h!* He knows me, for he was a porter in our hotel. When he sees us he'll know I've come home to warn Brick. *S-h-h!* Then he'll try to keep me from doing it. Look — some of his gang are speaking to him — they've been waiting here to meet him — they'll go with him, I expect. We'll all be in the stage-coach together!"

"What do you want me to do to 'em, Lahoma?"

"I want you to pretend that you don't know me — and they mustn't find out your name is Compton, or they'll think Mr. Edgerton got word to you to join me here. Be a stranger till we're safe in the cove."

"All right. Good-by — but suppose I hadn't come?"

"Oh, I could have done without you," said Lahoma. "Or I think I could."

"You could never have done without me!" Wilfred declared decidedly.

"I can right *now*—" She drew away. "I'll get into the stage; don't follow too soon."

There were three stage-coaches drawn up at a short distance from the platform, and Lahoma went swiftly to the one bound for her part of the country. She was the first to enter; she was seated quietly in a corner when the two long seats that faced each

other began filling up. The last to come were four men: one, tall, slender, red-faced and red-haired, two others of dark and lowering faces, who looked upon the former as their leader, and the last, Wilfred Compton, who had unobtrusively joined himself to this remnant of Red Kimball's gang.

The stage, which was built after the manner of the old-fashioned omnibus, afforded no opportunity of moving to and fro in the selection of seats, hence, when Red Kimball discovered Lahoma's identity — the exact moment of the discovery was marked by his violent start — she was safeguarded from his approach by her proximity to a very large woman flanked by a thin spinster. These were two sisters, going to the evening's station where the coach would stop for supper, and Lahoma discussed with them their plans and hopes with bright cheerfulness and ready friendship.

Wilfred watched Red Kimball as he glared in that direction, and guessed his thoughts. Although Kimball knew Lahoma, he was not sure that she knew him; and though he was convinced at once that she was on a mission of warning, that might be true without her knowing that he had left Kansas City. Red Kimball was burning to find out if he were a stranger to her, but at the same time fearful

of disclosing himself. He muttered to his companions hoarsely, careful that Wilfred, whom he regarded askance, should overhear nothing that he said.

The situation was such as could not very well continue during the days it would take the coach to reach Mangum; but although Wilfred was conscious of the strain, he felt excitedly happy. Very little of his attention was given to Kimball, and a great deal to Lahoma. She was talking to the sisters about the baby of the one and the chickens of the other, offering advice on both subjects from the experience of a certain Mrs. Featherby whom she had known as a child.

"Mrs. Featherby was a very wonderful woman," Lahoma announced with conviction, "and the first woman I ever knew. And when her baby was teething . . ." The very large lady listened with great attention.

"She told me this when I was a small girl," Wilfred presently heard Lahoma saying. "And I treasured it in my mind. I stored myself with her experience about everything there is. It came to me, then, that if she moved away from Headquarters Mountain — that's *my* mountain — maybe no other woman would ever come there to live; so I

stored myself, because I was determined to learn the business of being a woman."

The large woman gazed upon her admiringly. "I guess you learned, all right."

They had not gone five miles before the large woman and her younger sister were in love with Lahoma — but it hadn't taken Wilfred five miles. As he listened to her bright suggestions, and noted her living eyes, her impulsive gestures — for she could not talk without making little movements with her hands — and her flexible sympathetic voice, he saw her moving about a well-ordered household. . . . It was on his farm, of course; and the house was his,— and she was his Lahoma. . . .

Red Kimball watched her with the same sidewise attention, but his face was brooding, his half-veiled eyes were red and threatening. What would happen in the night-time as the stage pursued its lonely way across the bleak prairie? Since Red Kimball meant to appeal to the law in his revenge against Brick, there was no danger of his transgressing it openly. But in the darkness with two unscrupulous companions under his command, he would most probably execute some scheme to prevent Lahoma from reaching her destination.

The evening shadows were stretching far toward

the east from the few trees that marked the dried bed of a stream, when the coach stopped among a collection of hovels and tents. As the horses were led away, the passengers dismounted, and both Wilfred and Red Kimball hurriedly drew close to Lahoma.

Lahoma, however, appeared unaware of their presence. The sisters had been met by the husband of the older, and as they gathered about the big wagon, Lahoma was urged to go home with them to supper.

"We're only a little ways out," she was told, "and we'll sure get you back before the stage leaves — the victuals at the station ain't fit to eat."

A very little insistence induced Lahoma to comply, and both the young man and the former highwayman saw her go with disappointment. Kimball and his friends went into the "Dining Hall" to gulp down a hasty meal, and Wilfred entered with them. He remained only a moment, however, just long enough to purchase a number of sandwiches which he stored away, as if meaning to eat them in the coach.

As soon as he was in the single street with the door closed behind him, he darted toward the stage barn, and by means of a handsome deposit obtained

two horses. Springing upon one, he rode rapidly from the settlement, leading the other, and in a short time, came in sight of a cabin, which, with its outhouses, was the only building in all the wide expanse. From its appearance he knew it to be the one described to Lahoma, and he galloped up to the door with the certainty of finding her within. The big wagon had been unhitched, and the horses were fastened to its wheels, eating from the bed.

The family was about to sit down to supper; the first to discover Wilfred as he flitted past the single window in the side of the cabin, was Lahoma. Before he could knock on the door, she had opened it.

"Oh, Wilfred!" she reproached him, "they'll miss you and know you've come to consult with me about warning Brick."

"Quick, Lahoma!" said Wilfred, as if she had not spoken, "you can ride a horse, I suppose?" He smiled, but his eyes were sparkling with impatience.

In a flash, Lahoma's face was glowing with enthusiasm. She looked back into the room and cried, "Good-by!" Then Wilfred swung her to the back of the led horse. "We'll beat 'em!" cried Lahoma, as he sprang upon his horse. "Fast as you please — I've never been left behind, yet!"

The young man noted with sudden relief that she was dressed for the hardships of the prairie. It came to him with a sense of wonder that he had not noticed that before, perhaps from never having seen her in fashionable attire. As they galloped from the cabin, from whose door looked astonished faces, Lahoma answered his thought —

"Up there," she said, nodding her head toward the East, "I dressed for people — but out here, for wind and sand."

Looking back, she saw the family running out of the cottage, waving handkerchiefs and bonnets as in the mad joy of congratulation.

"They think we're running away together!" shouted Wilfred with exultation. The hurry of their flight, the certainty of pursuit, the prospect of dangers from man and nature, thrilled his blood, fixed his jaw, illumined his eye. All life seemed suddenly a flight across a level world whose cloud of yellow dust enveloped only himself and Lahoma. "They think we're running away together. Look at them, Lahoma. How happy they are at the idea!"

"They don't know there's nobody to object, if we don't," returned Lahoma gaily, as she urged on her steed. "Come along, Wilfred," she taunted,

as his horse fell a neck behind hers, "what are you staying back *there* for? Tired? If we get into the trail before that coach starts, we'll have to put on all speed."

"Doing my best," he called, "but I made a bad bargain when I got this beast. This is his best lick, and it doesn't promise to last long. However, it was the only one left at the barn."

Lahoma slightly checked her animal. "That's a good thing, anyway — if there's none left, those horrible men can't follow."

Wilfred did not answer. He was sure the stage would be driven in pursuit at breakneck speed, and from the breathing of his horse he feared it could not long endure the contest. To be sure, Red Kimball and his men had no lawful excuse to offer the stage-driver for an attempt to stop them; but three men who had once been desperate highwaymen might not look for lawful excuses on a dark night in a dreary desert. Besides, Kimball might, with some show of reason, argue that since he was bent on the legitimate object of having a writ served on Brick Willock, he would be justified in preventing Brick from being warned out of the country.

They galloped on in silence, Lahoma slightly holding back. Night rapidly drew on.

CHAPTER XX

TOGETHER

BEFORE them, the trail, beaten and rutted, stretched interminably, losing itself in the darkness before it slipped over the rounded margin of the world. As darkness increased, the trail seemed to waver before their eyes like a gray scarf that the wind stirs on the ground. On either side of it, the nature of the country varied with strange abruptness, now an unbroken stretch of dead sage-brush showing like isolated tufts in a gigantic clothes-brush — suddenly, a wilderness of white sand shifting as the wind rose — again, broken rocks sown broadcast. Before final darkness came, the trail itself was varicolored, sometimes white with alkali, sometimes skirting low hills whose sides showed a deep blue, streaked with crimson.

But now all was black, sand, alkali, gypsum-beds, for the night had fallen.

In their wide détour they had endeavored to escape detection from the stage-station, but sheltered by no appreciable inequalities of land, and denied

the refuge that even a small grove might have furnished, they had, as it were, been held up to view on the prairie; and though so far away, their horses had been as distinctly outlined as two ants scurrying across a white page.

Wilfred reflected. "If Kimball, when he came out of that restaurant, happened to look in this direction, he must have seen us; and the first inquiry at the barn would inform him who're on the horses." But he said nothing until, from the rear, came the sound long-dreaded, telling, though far away, of bounding horses and groaning wheels.

"Lahoma!"

"Yes — I hear them."

"My horse is about used up. We'll have to side-trail, or they'll ride us down."

"I could go on," Lahoma answered, as she drew hard on the bit, "but I wouldn't like to leave you here by yourself."

"You couldn't travel that distance by yourself. And good as your horse is, it wouldn't last. But thank you for thinking of me," he added, smiling in the darkness, as he dismounted. "Let me lead your horse as well as my own."

"No," said Lahoma, "if leading is to be done, I'll do my part." She leaped lightly to the ground

and seized her bridle. Side by side they slowly ventured from the trail into the invisible country on the left. They found themselves treading short dead mesquit that did not greatly obstruct their progress.

"Keep going," Wilfred said, when she paused for breath. "It wouldn't do for our horses to whinny, for those fellows would hear them if it was thundering. Give me your hand."

"Here it is," Lahoma felt about in the darkness. "My! but I'm glad I've got you, Wilfred! Oh, how they are dashing along! Listen how the man is lashing his whip over those four horses. Wish we could see 'em — must be grand, tearing along at that rate!"

The stage was rapidly coming up abreast of them, and Wilfred felt her grasp tighten. There was a flash of lights, a glimpse of the driver's face as of creased leather as he raised his whip above his head — then noise and cloud of dust passed on and the lights became trailing sparks that in a minute or two the wind seemed to blow out.

"My poor Brick!" Lahoma wailed. "Do you think he'll take good enough care of himself from what I wrote in my letters? But no, he doesn't think Red Kimball is coming yet, for I didn't know

it till after I'd written. He's with Bill now, waiting for another letter. Or for a telegram."

"No, no, Lahoma," Wilfred tried to sooth her. "He has been hiding for days. Why should he come out just at the wrong time? You wrote that you'd not send any more messages. Brick will be on the lookout for Kimball. He is sure to be watching out for him."

"I know Brick," Lahoma protested, seemingly all at once overcome by the fatigues of her journey and the hopelessness of the situation. "I was afraid he wouldn't agree to hide at all; and just as soon as you came away, and there wasn't any more prospects of letters, he'd get lonesome, and tire of staying away from home. He's in that cove this minute, and he'll be there when Red Kimball takes the sheriff after him." Her voice quivered with distress.

"Don't be afraid, Lahoma," urged Wilfred, slipping his arm protectingly about her. "Don't grieve — I'm sure Brick is in a safe place."

"Well, *I'm* not in danger," said Lahoma, withdrawing from his involuntary embrace. "Don't take *me* for Brick! Maybe you're right — but no, I'm sure he wouldn't be willing to stay out in the mountains week after week — and during these cold

nights! For it is cold, right now. We must hurry on, Wilfred."

"There's one comfort," said Wilfred, as they retraced their way toward the trail. "Mr. Gledware won't appear as a witness against Brick. We'll get him cleared, easy enough."

"But Mr. Gledware *will* appear against him, and he'll swear anything that Red Kimball wants."

"I thought he agreed to do that only on condition that a certain pin —"

"*Yes!* But Red Kimball brought him that pin just before I left!"

"Brought him the pin that the Indian had?"

"Yes, the pearl and onyx pin. And Mr. Gledware seemed to consider it so important that I know Red Feather would never have given it up while he had life."

"Then . . .?"

Lahoma shuddered. "*Yes!* You see, *now,* what a fiend Red Kimball is. And you know, *now,* what a hold he has over Mr. Gledware,—can make him testify in such a way as to ruin my poor Brick. If Brick knew this, he'd understand how important it is to flee for his life and never, *never* let himself be taken. But he thinks nobody could get the better of Red Feather. You see, if he just dreamed

what has happened, he'd *know* Mr. Gledware can convict him."

"We must reach Brick Willock before Red Kimball gets his warrant!" exclaimed Wilfred desperately.

"Yes, we must, we must!" Lahoma was growing slightly hysterical. "I won't mind any hardship, any danger — but what are we to do? You won't let me ride on alone — and you wouldn't be willing to leave me here and take the good horse yourself."

"You're quite right about that!" returned the young man promptly. "We can only mount again, and go as fast as my miserable beast can travel, hoping for some chance to come our way. We have the advantage of not being in the stage where Kimball could keep an eye on us."

"I ought to be more thankful for that than I am," Lahoma sighed. They mounted, but as they rode forward, Wilfred's horse lagged more and more.

"It's slow sailing," Wilfred remarked, "but it will give us a chance to talk. By the way, do you feel ready for supper?" From his overcoat pocket he drew forth the sandwiches.

It seemed to Lahoma to show an unfeeling heart to experience hunger at such a time, and to find the

ham sandwiches good; but it was none the less true that they were good, and the mustard with which the ham was plastered added a tang of hope and returned a defiant answer to the cold inquiry of the north wind.

After they had eaten and the remaining sandwiches had been carefully stowed away in Wilfred's capacious pocket, they pressed forward with renewed energy on the part of all save Wilfred's horse. By dint of constant urging it was kept going faster than a walk though it was obsessed by a consuming desire to lie down. In order to keep Lahoma's mind from dwelling on their difficulties and on Brick's peril, the young man maintained conversation at high pressure, ably seconded by his companion who was anxious to show herself undaunted.

Wilfred chose as the topic to engage Lahoma's mind, the future of Oklahoma Territory. The theme filled him with enthusiasm such as no long-settled commonwealth is able to inspire, and though Lahoma considered herself a Texan, she was able to enter into his spirit from having always lived at the margin of the new country. Wilfred dwelt on the day when Oklahoma would no longer be represented in congress by a delegate without the right to vote, but would take its place as a state whose constitution

should be something new and inspiring in the history of civil documents.

Wilfred meant to have a part in the framing of that constitution and as he outlined some of his theories of government, Lahoma listened with quick sympathy and appreciation. A new feeling for him, something like admiration, something like pride, stirred within her. Here was a man who meant to do things, things eminently worth a man's time and strength; and yet, for all his high purposes, there was no look, no tone, to indicate that he held himself at a higher valuation than those for whom he meant to labor. As in time of stress the strongest man is given the heaviest burden, so he seemed to take to himself a leading part in the future of his country that all who dwelt within its borders might find it a freer, a richer, a better country because of him.

"You'll call me ambitious," said Wilfred, glowing. "Well, I am. You'll accuse me of wanting power. So I do!"

Her eyes flashed. "And I'm ambitious for you!" she cried. "Go ahead and get power. Take the earth! Don't stop till you reach the sea — that's the spirit of the West. But how did you ever think of these things?"

"During my long winters on my quarter-section,

nobody in sight — just the prairie and me. Nothing else to think about except the country that's new-born. So I studied out a good many things, just thinking about Oklahoma and — and —"

Lahoma said softly, "I *knew* there was *something else* you thought about."

"Yes," exclaimed Wilfred, thrilled. "Yes — there *was* something else!"

"A little girl, I guess," murmured Lahoma gently, with a touch of compassion in her tone.

"You've guessed it, Lahoma — yes, the dearest little girl in the world."

"I wish she could have cared for you — *that* way — like your voice sounds," murmured Lahoma.

"Maybe she can," Wilfred's voice grew firmer. "Yes — she *must!*"

"Have you found a gold-mine?"

"What are you talking about, Lahoma? What has a gold-mine to do with it?"

"Because nothing else goes," returned Lahoma decisively. "You might get single statehood for Oklahoma, and write the constitution yourself, and be elected governor — but you'd look just the same to Annabel, unless you had a gold-mine."

Wilfred gave a jerk at his bridle. "Who's talk-

ing about Annabel?" he cried rather sharply. He had forgotten that there was an Annabel.

"Everybody is," returned Lahoma, somewhat sharply on her own account, "everybody is, or ought to be!"

"*I* am not," retorted Wilfred, springing to the ground just in time — for his horse, on being checked, had promptly lain down.

"Then that's what you get!" remarked Lahoma severely, staring down at the dark blur on the trail which her imagination correctly interpreted as the horse stretched out on its side.

CHAPTER XXI

THE NORTHER

THE wind increased in fury. Fortunately it was at their back. Wilfred pressed forward on foot, leading Lahoma's horse; and, partly on account of their unequal position, partly because of awkward reserve, no more was said for a long time. She bent forward to shelter her face from the stinging blast while he trod firmly and methodically on and on, braced slightly backward against the wind, which was like a hand pushing him forward.

The voice of the wind filled the night. It whistled and shrieked in minor keys, dying away at brief intervals to come again with a rush and roar. It penetrated him to the bone, for he had compelled her to wrap herself in his overcoat, and when the first stinging grains of fiercely driven sleet pelted his cheek, he smothered a cry of dismay over her exposed situation.

It could not be far past midnight. The prospect of a snow-storm in the bleak lands of the Kiowa ap-

palled him, but even while facing that possibility his mind was busy with Lahoma's attitude toward himself. Evidently it had never occurred to her that Annabel had vanished from his fancy years ago; now that she knew, she was displeased — most unreasonably so, he thought. Lahoma did not approve of Annabel — why should she want him to remain passively under her yoke? Unconsciously his form stiffened in protest as he trudged forward. The wind, so far from showing signs of abatement, slightly increased, no longer with intervals of pause. The sleet changed rapidly first to snow, then to rain — then hail, snow and rain alternated, or descended simultaneously, always driven with cruel force by the relentless wind.

At last Lahoma shouted, "It's a regular norther! How're you getting along, Wilfred?"

Despite their discomfort, his heart leaped at this unexpected note of comradeship. Had she already forgiven him for not loving Annabel? "Oh, Lahoma!" he cried with sudden tenderness, "what will become of you?"

She returned gravely, "What will become of Brick? Northers are bad, but not so bad as some men — Red Kimball, for instance." A terrific blast shook the half-frozen overcoat about her shoulders

as if to snatch it away. "Don't you wish the Indians built their villages closer to the trail? Ugh! Hadn't we better burrow a storm-cellar in the sand? I feel awfully high up in the air."

"Poor Lahoma!"

"Believe I'll walk with you, Wilfred; I'm turning to a lady-icicle."

"Do! I know it would warm you up — a little." His teeth showed an inclination to chatter. "Come — I'll help you down. Can you find my arm?"

At that moment the horse gave a violent lunge, then came to a standstill, quivering and snorting with fright. Wilfred's groping arm found the saddle empty.

"I didn't have to climb down," announced her uncertain voice from a distance. It came seemingly from the level of the plain.

"You've fallen — you are hurt!" he exclaimed, but he could not go to her because the horse refused to budge from the spot and he dared not loosen his hold.

"Well, I'm a little warmer, anyway!" Her voice approached slowly. "That was quick exercise; I didn't know I was going to do it till I was down. Lit on my feet, anyhow. Why don't you come to meet me?"

"This miserable beast won't move a foot. Come and hold him, Lahoma, while I examine in front, to find out what's scared him."

"All right. Where are you? Can you find my hand?"

"Can't I!" retorted Wilfred, clasping it in a tight grasp.

"Gracious, how wet we are!" she panted, "and blown about. And frozen."

"And scolded," he added plaintively.

"But, Wilfred, it never entered my mind that *I* was the little girl. Would I have brought up the subject if I'd known the truth? I never would. That's why I felt you took advantage . . . a man ought to bring up that subject himself even if I *am* a girl out West and —"

"But Lahoma —"

"And not another word do I want you to say about it. *Ever.* At least, to-night. *Please,* Wilfred! So I can think about it. I'll hold the horse — you go on and find out what's the matter.

"Besides, you said — you *know* you said, when we were strolling — that — that I didn't understand such matters. And that you'd tell me when it was *time.* . . ."

"It's time now, Lahoma, time for you to be some-

body's sweetheart — and you said — you *know* you said, when we were strolling — that I'd fill the bill for you."

"But I brought up the subject myself, and I mean to close it, right short off, for it's a man's subject. Oh, how trembly this horse is!"

"But, Lahoma!"

"Well, what is it?"

"I just wanted to say your name." He started away. "It sounds good to me."

"Yes, it stands for Oklahoma."

"It stands for much more than that!" he called.

"Yes," she persisted in misunderstanding him, "something big and grand."

"Not so big," he cried, now at some distance, "but what there's room for more than Brick and Bill in the cove!"

If she answered, the wind drowned her words. With extended arms he groped along the trail with exceeding caution. Suddenly his foot touched an object which on examination proved to be a human body, a gaping wound in its breast.

"Found anything?" called Lahoma, her voice shivering.

He rose quickly and almost stumbled over another object. It was a second body, stiffened in death.

"I'll be there in a minute," he called, his voice grave and steady. After a brief pause he added — "I've found one of the horses — it's dead."

"Oh, oh!" she exclaimed. "They've driven it to death."

Wilfred had found a bullet hole behind its ear, but he said nothing.

Suddenly the horse held by Lahoma gave a plunge, broke away and went galloping back over the trail they had traversed, pursued by Lahoma's cry of dismay. "I couldn't hold him," she gasped. "He lifted me clear off the ground . . ."

Wilfred was also dismayed, but he preserved an accent of calm as he felt his way toward her, uttering encouragement for which their condition offered no foundation. But his forced cheerfulness suddenly changed to real congratulation when his extended hand struck against an upright wheel.

"Lahoma, here's the stage-coach. It's standing just as we saw it last, except for the horses."

"The stage-coach!" she marveled, coming toward him. "Oh, Wilfred, I see now what's happened. One of the horses dropped dead, and Red Kimball and his men jumped on the other three . . . But I wonder what became of the driver?"

"Get inside!" he ordered. "Thank God, we've

found *something* that we can get inside of. That'll shelter us till morning, anyway, and then we can determine what's to be done."

Once in the coach, they were safe from the wind which howled above and around them, rattling the small windows and making the springs creak. There was no help for the discomfort of soaking garments, but Wilfred lighted a reserve lantern and placed it in a corner, while thick leather cushions and stage-blankets offered some prospect of rest.

As no plans could be formed until morning revealed their real plight, they agreed that all conversation should be foregone in order to recuperate from the hardships of the day for the trials of tomorrow. Lahoma soon fell asleep after her exhausting journey of a day and half a night since leaving the train at Chickasha.

For hours Wilfred sat opposite, staring at her worn face, pathetic in its youthful roundness from which the bloom had vanished, wondering at her grace, beauty, helplessness and perfect faith in him. That faith revealed in every line of the form lying along the seat, and spoke from the unconscious face from which the brown hair was outspread to dry.

How oddly her voice had sounded, how strange had been its accent when she said, " It never entered

my mind that *I* was the little girl!" Had she been sorry for the thought to come? Did she think less of him because he had not remained true to Annabel? Would it not have been far better to wait until reaching their destination before hinting of love? Even while perplexed over these problems, and while charmed by that appealing face with the softly parted lips, by the figure that stirred in the rhythm of slumber, other thoughts, other objects weighed upon him — the two dead men, the dead horse just outside. One of those men might be Red Kimball; other bodies might lie there which he had failed to discover. Had the stage been attacked by Indians, or by white desperadoes who found shelter in the Kiowa country? In either case, might not the enemy be hovering about the trail, possibly waiting to descend on the coach?

Armed and watchful, Wilfred waited through the hours. When no longer able to bear the uncertainty, he crept from the stage with the lantern, and examined the recent scene of a furious struggle. There were only two slain — the driver and one of Red Kimball's companions. Either Kimball and his other comrade had escaped, or had been captured. If any of the attacking party had fallen, the bodies had been borne away. Blood-stains indicated that more

than two had been shot. From that ghastly sight it was a relief to find himself once more enclosed by the coach walls with Lahoma so peacefully sleeping.

Once he fell into a doze from which he was startled by the impression that soft noises, not of wind or rain, were creeping over the earth. He sat erect with the confused fancy that wolves were slinking among the wheels, were glaring up at the windows, were dragging away the corpses. The sudden movement of his hand as it grasped his pistol awoke Lahoma.

She opened her eyes wide, but did not lift her cheek from the arm that lay along the cushion. "There you are," she said, "just as I was dreaming."

He pretended not to be uneasy, but his ears strained to catch the meaning of those mysterious movements of the night. Her voice cut across the vague murmur of the open plain:

"You only came once!"

Although her eyes were wide, she was apparently but half-awake; not a muscle moved as she looked into his face. "I thought," she murmured, "it was on account of Annabel."

"I went away because I loved you," he answered softly. "I promised Brick I'd go if I felt myself

caring — and nobody could help caring for you. That's why I left the country. Just as soon as we laughed together — it happened. That's why I didn't come again."

"Yes," sighed Lahoma, as if it was not so hard to understand, now.

"And that's why I've come back," he added. "Because I've kept on loving you."

"Yes," she sighed again. She closed her eyes and seemed to fall asleep. Perhaps it was a sort of knowing sleep that lost most of the world but clung tenaciously to a few ideas. The noises of the night died away. Presently he heard her murmur as a little smile crept about the parted lips, "The cove's pretty big . . . there's more room than I thought."

When she was wide awake, daylight had slipped through the windows. "Oh, Wilfred!" she exclaimed, sitting suddenly erect, and putting her hands to her head mechanically. "Is — are we all right?"

"All right," said the young man cheerily. "There's a good deal of snow on the ground but it was blown off the trail for the most part. Some friends have provided us with the means of going forward."

"But I don't understand."

"We'll finish the sandwiches, and melt some snow for water, and then mount. Look — see those two Indian ponies fastened to the tongue of the stage? They'll carry us to the next station like the wind."

She stared from the window, bewildered.

"I don't know any more about them than you," he answered her thoughts. "But there they are and here we are." He said nothing about the bodies evidently carried away by those who had brought the ponies. "It's all a mystery — a mystery of the plains. I haven't unraveled the very first thread of it. What's the use? The western way is to take what comes, isn't it, whether northers or ponies? There's a much bigger mystery than all that filling my mind."

"What is that?"

"You."

She bent over the sandwich with heightened color. "Poor Brick!" she murmured as if to divert his thoughts. But his sympathy just then was not for Brick.

"Lahoma, you said that this is a subject a man should bring up."

She looked at him brightly, still flushing. "Well?"

"I'm bringing it up, Lahoma."

"But we must be planning to save Brick from arrest."

"I'm hoping we'll get home in time — note that I say *home,* Lahoma. I refer to the cove. I'm hoping we'll reach home in time to forestall Red Kimball. We've lost a great deal of time, but Brick doubtless is safely hiding. And when we get to the journey's end — Lahoma, do you know what naturally comes at the journey's end?"

"No."

"A marriage."

"I thought that was what you meant."

"Will you marry me at the journey's end?"

Lahoma turned very red and laid down the sandwich. Then she laughed. Then she started up. "Let's get on the ponies!" she cried.

CHAPTER XXII

JOURNEY'S END

THE snow, that morning, lay in drifts from five to eight inches across the trail, and to the height of several feet up against those rock walls raising, as on vast artificial tables, the higher stretches of the Kiowa country. But by noon the plain was scarcely streaked with white and when the sun set there was nothing to suggest that a snow-flake had ever fallen in that sand-strewn world. The interminable reaches, broken only by the level uplands marked from the plain by their perpendicular walls, and the Wichita Mountains, as faint and unsubstantial to the eye as curved images of smoke against the sky — these dreary monotonies and remotenesses naturally oppress the traveler with a sense of his insignificance. The vast silences, too, of brooding, treeless wastes, sun-baked river-beds, shadowless brown squares standing for miles at a brief height above the shadowless brown floor of the plain — silences amidst which only the wind

finds a voice — these, too, insist drearily on the nothingness of man.

But Wilfred and Lahoma were not thus affected. The somethingness of man had never to them been so thrillingly evident. They saw and heard that which was not, except for those having eyes and ears to apprehend — roses in the sand, bird-song in the desert. And when the rude cabins and hasty tents of the last stage-station in Greer County showed dark and white against the horizon of a spring-like morning, Wilfred cried exultantly:

"The end of the journey!"

And Lahoma, suddenly showing in her cheeks all the roses that had opened in her dreams, repeated gaily, yet a little brokenly:

"The end of the journey!"

The end of the journey meant a wedding. The plains blossom with endless flower-gardens and the mountains sing together when the end of the journey means a wedding.

Leaving Lahoma at the small new hotel from whose boards the sun began boiling out resin as soon as it was well aloft, Wilfred hurried after a fresh horse to carry him at once to the cove, ten miles away. Warning must be given to Brick Willock first of all. Lahoma even had a wild hope that

Brick might devise some means whereby he could attend the wedding without danger of arrest, but to Wilfred this seemed impossible.

He had gone but a few steps from the hotel when he came face to face with the sheriff of Greer County. Cutting short his old friend's outburst of pleasure:

"Look here, Mizzoo," said Wilfred, drawing him aside from the curious throng on the sidewalk, "have you got a warrant against Brick Willock?"

Mizzoo tapped his breast. "Here!" he said; "know where he is?"

Wilfred sighed with relief: "At any rate, *you* don't!" he cried.

"No —'rat him! Where're you going, Bill?"

"I want a horse . . ."

"No use riding over to the cove," remarked his friend, with a grin. "That is, unless you want to call on some friends of mine — deputies; they're living in the dugout, just laying for Brick to show himself."

"But, *Mizzoo!*" expostulated Wilfred, "why are you taking so much trouble against my best friend? The warrant ought to be enough; and if you can't get a chance to serve it on him, that's not your fault.

Your deputies haven't any right in that cove, and I'm going to smoke 'em out."

Mizzoo chewed, with a deprecatory shake of his head. "See here, old tap," he murmured, "don't you say nothing about being Brick Willock's friend. The whole country is roused against him. Heard of them three bodies?"

Wilfred explained that he had just come to town.

"Well, good lord, then, the pleasure I'm going to have in telling you something you don't know, and something that's full of meat! Let's go wheres we can sit down — this ain't no standing news." The lank red-faced sheriff started across the street without looking to see if he were followed.

He did not stop till he was in his room at the hotel. "Now," he said, locking the door, "sit down. Yes, you *bet,* I got a warrant against Brick Willock! It was sworn out by a fellow named Jeremiah Kimball — you know him as 'Red.' The form's regular, charges weighty. Brick Willock was once a member of Red Kimball's gang; he's the only one that didn't come in to get his amnesty. See? Well, he killed Red's brother — shot 'im. Gledware's coming on to witness to it. Willock will claim he done the deed to save Gledware's life — his and his little gal's. But Gledware will show it was

otherwise. Red told me all about it. Brick's a murderer, and worst of all, he's a murderer without an amnesty — that's the only difference between him and Red. Well, old tap, I took my oath to do my duty. You know what that signifies."

"But there's no truth in all this rot. Brick *had* to shoot Kansas Kimball —"

"Well, let him show that in court. My business is to take him alive. That ain't all, that's just the preface. Listen! If you'll believe me, the stage that Red and his pards was in — coming here to swear out the warrant, they was — that there stage was set on by this friend of yours — yes, Brick has gathered together some of his old pards and is a highwayman — why, he shot one of Red's witnesses, and he shot the driver!"

"I know something about that holdup," cried Wilfred scornfully. "It must have been done by Indians."

"Red *saw* Brick amongst the gang. He *recognized* him. Well, Red and his other pard gets on horses they cuts loose, and comes like lightning, and gets here, and tells the story — and maybe you think this community ain't a-rearing and a-charging and a-sniffing for blood! There'd be more excitement

against Brick Willock if there was more community, but such as they is, is concentrated."

"Mizzoo, listen to reason. Don't you understand that Red wants revenge, and has misrepresented this Indian attack to tally with his other lies?"

"I wouldn't say nothing against Red, old tap, it ain't gentlemanly to call dead folk liars."

"Dead folk!" echoed Wilfred, starting up.

"I *knowed* you didn't understand that Red's off the trail forever," Mizzoo rejoined gently. "I knowed you wouldn't be accusing him so rancid, had you been posted on his funeral."

Wilfred felt a great relief, then a great wonder.

"Yes, he's dead. I don't say he's better off, I don't know; but I guess the world is. I don't like to censure them that's departed. Brick Willock is still with us, and him the county can't say enough against. His life wouldn't be worth two-bits if anybody laid eyes on 'im. Consider his high-handed doings. Wasn't it enough in the past to kill Red's brother, but what he must needs collect his pals, stop the stage-coach, shoot two men trying to get Red, and one of 'em the innocent driver? You say, yes. But hold on, that ain't all he done. No, sir. The very next day after Red swore out that warrant —

and it was yesterday, if you ask *me* — what is saw, when we men of Mangum comes out of our doors? Three corpses lying on the sidewalk, side by side. You say, what corpses? Wait. I'm coming to that. One was that driver; one was the pard that got shot with the driver. The other was Red Kimball his own self."

"I knew the bodies had been carried away from the trail," exclaimed Wilfred in perplexity. He related his discoveries of the stormy night.

"But you didn't know they had been brung to town all this distance to be laid beside Red. You didn't know Red had been stabbed so he could be added, too. You didn't know the three of them had been left on the street to rile up every man with blood in his veins. Why, Wilfred, it's an insult to the whole state of Texas. Such high-handed doings ain't to be bore. If Brick Willock don't want to be tried in court, is that an excuse for killing off all that might witness against him? It might of been *once*. But we're determined to have a county of law-abiding citizens. Such free living has got to be nipped in the bud, or we'll have another No-Man's Land. We're determined to live under the laws. This is civilization. The cattle business is dead, land is getting tied up by title-deeds, the deer's gone,

and there's nothing left but civilization. And I am the — er — as sheriff of Greer County I am a — I am the angel of civilization, you may say."

Mizzoo started up, too excited to notice Wilfred's suddenly distorted face. It was no time to display a sense of the ludicrous; the young man hotly burst into passionate argument and reasonable hypothesis."

"We've got civilization," Mizzoo declared doggedly, "and we aim to hold on to her, you bet! There's going to be no such doings as three corpses stretched out on the sidewalk for breakfast, not while I'm at the helm. How'd that look, if wrote up for the New York papers? That ain't all — remember that ghost I used to worry my life out over, trying to meet up with on the trail? Him, or her or it, that haunted every step of the way from Abilene to the Gulf of Mexico? It's a flitting, that ghost is! Well, I don't claim that no ghost is in my jurisdiction. Brick's flesh and blood, there's bone to him. As my aunt (Miss Sue of Missouri) used to say, 'he's some *man*.'"

Waving aside Mizzoo's ghost, Wilfred elaborated his theory of an Indian attack, described Brick's peaceable disposition, his gentleness to Lahoma — then dwelt on the friendship between himself and

Brick, and the relations between himself and Brick's ward.

"It all comes to this," Mizzoo declared: "if you could make me think Willock a harmless lamb and as innocent, it wouldn't change conditions. This neighborhood calls for his life and'd take it if in reach; and my warrant calls for his arrest. All I can promise is to get him, if possible, behind the bars before the mob gets him in a rope. As my aunt, whom I have oft-times quoted — my aunt (Miss Sue of Missouri, a woman of elegant sense) — 'that's the word,' she used to say, 'with the bark on it!'"

Wilfred permitted himself the pleasure of taunting Mizzoo with the very evident truth that before Willock was hanged or imprisoned, he must first be caught.

Mizzoo grinned good-naturedly. "Yap. Well, we've got a clew locked up in jail right now that could tell us something, I judge, and will tell us something before set free; it's name is Bill Atkins. He's a wise old coon, but as sour as a boiled owl,— nothing as yet to be negotiated with him than if he was a bobcat catched in a trap. We're hoping time'll mellow him — time and the prospect of being took out and swung from the nearest limb — speaking

literary, not by nature, as you know trees is as scarce about here as Brick Willock himself."

Wilfred insisted on an immediate visit to Bill. "Brick declared he wouldn't tell Bill his hiding-place," he said, "for he didn't want to get him into trouble. He'll tell me if he knows anything — and if he doesn't, it's an outrage to shut him up, old as he is, and as rheumatic as he's old."

On the way to the rudely improvised prison, Mizzoo defended himself. "He wasn't too old and rheumatic to fight like a wildcat — why, he had to be lifted up bodily and carried into his cell. Not a word can we get out of him, or a bite of grub into him. I believe that old codger's just too obstinate to die!"

When they reached the prison door, the crowd gathered about them, eager for news, watching Mizzoo unfasten the door as if he were unlocking the secret to Willock's whereabouts. There were loud imprecations on the head of the murderer, and fierce prophecies as to what would happen to Bill if he preserved his incriminating silence. It seemed but a moment before hurrying forms from many directions packed themselves into a mass before the jail.

The cells were in the basement. The only en-

trance to the building was by means of a flight of six steps leading to an unroofed platform before the door of the story proper. Mizzoo and Wilfred, standing on this platform, were lifted above the heads of perhaps a hundred men who watched eagerly the dangling bunch of keys. Mizzoo had stationed three deputies at the foot of the steps to keep back the mob, for if the excited men once rushed into the jail nothing could check their course. The deputies, tall broad-shouldered fellows, pushed back the threatening tide, always with good-natured protests,— words half bantering, half appealing, repulsive thrusts of the arms, rough but inflicting no hurt. So peaceful a minute before had been the Square, it was difficult to comprehend the sudden spirit of danger.

Mizzoo whispered to Wilfred, "We'd better get in as quick as possible."

The words were lost in the increasing roar of voices. He spoke again:

"When I swing open the door, that bunch will try to make a run for it. You jump inside and I'll be after you like a shot . . . We'll lock ourselves in—"

"Hey, Mizzoo!" shouted a voice from the crowd,

"bring out that old cuss. Drag him to the platform, we want to hear what he's got to say."

"Say, Mr. Sheriff! Tell him if he won't come to us, we'll go to him. We've got to know where Brick Willock's hiding, and that's all about it."

"Sure!" growled a third. "What kind of a town is this, anyway? A refuge for highwaymen and murderers?"

A struggle took place at the foot of the stairs, not so good-naturedly as heretofore. A reasoning voice was heard: "Just let me say a word to the boys."

"Yes!" called others, "let's hear *him!*"

There was a surging forward, and a man was lifted literally over the heads of the three deputies; he reached the platform breathless, disheveled, but triumphant. It was the survivor of Red Kimball's band.

Mizzoo, mistaking his coming for a general rush, had hastily relocked the door, and he and Wilfred defended themselves with drawn revolvers.

"I ain't up here to do no harm," called the ex-highwayman. "I ain't got the spirit for warfare. My chief is killed, my pards is dead. Even that innocent stage-driver what knew nothing of us, is

killed in the attack that Brick Willock made on us in the dark and behind our backs. How're you going to grow when the whole world knows you ain't nothing but a den of snakes? You may claim it's all Brick Willock. I say if he's bigger than the town, if he murders and stabs and you can't help it, then the town ain't as good as him. My life's in danger. I don't know if I'll draw another breath. What kind of a reputation is that for you to send abroad? There's a man in this jail can tell you where Willock's hiding. Good day!"

The speaker was down the steps in two leaps, and the deputies drew aside to let him pass out. Civic pride, above all, civic ambition, had been touched to the quick. A hoarse roar followed the speech, and cries for Bill grew frantic. Mizzoo, afraid to unlock the door, stared at Wilfred in perplexity.

"I told you they had civilization on the brain," he muttered. "The old times are past. I daresn't make a move toward that lock."

"Drop the keys behind you — I'll get 'em," Wilfred murmured. "Step a little forward. Say something to 'em."

"Ain't got nothing to say," growled Mizzoo, glaring at the mob. "These boys are in the right of it, that's how I feel — cuss that obstinate old

bobcat! it's his own fault if they string him up."

"Here they come!" Wilfred exclaimed. "Steady now, old Mizzoo — we've whipped packs of wolves before to-day — coyotes crazy with hunger — big gray loafers in the rocks — eh, Mizzoo?" He shouted to the deputies who had been pushed against the railing: "Give it to 'em, boys!"

But the deputies did not fire, and the mob, though chafing with mad impatience, did not advance. It was a single figure that swept up the steps, unobstructed, aided, indeed, by the mass of packed men in the street — a figure slight and erect, tingling with the necessity of action to which every vein and muscle responded, tingling so vitally, so electrically, that the crowd also tingled, not understanding, but none the less thrilled.

"Lahoma!" Wilfred was at her side. "You here!"

"Yes, I'm here," she returned breathlessly, her face flaming with excitement. "I'm going to talk to these people — let me have that —" She took the revolver from his unresisting hand, uncocked it, and slipped it into her bosom. Then she faced the mob and held up her empty hand.

CHAPTER XXIII

FACING THE MOB

IT was the first time Lahoma had ever faced an audience larger than that composed of Brick and Bill and Willock, for in the city she had been content to play an unobtrusive part, listening to others, commenting inwardly. Speech was now but a mode of action, and in her effort to turn the sentiment of the mob, she sought not for words but emotions. Bill's life was at stake. What could she say to make them Bill's friends? After her uplifted hand had brought tense silence, she stood at a loss, her eyes big with the appeal her tongue refused to utter.

The mob was awed by that light in her eyes, by the crimson in her cheeks, by her beauty, freshness and grace. They would not proceed to violence while she stood there facing them. Her power she recognized, but she understood it was that of physical presence. When she was gone, her influence would depart. They knew Brick and Bill had sheltered her from her tenderest years, they ad-

mired her fidelity. Whatever she might say to try to move their hearts would come from a sense of gratitude and would be received in tolerant silence. The more guilty the highwayman, the more commendable her loyalty. But it would not change their purpose; as if waiting for a storm to pass, they stood stolid and close-mouthed, slightly bent forward, unresisting, but unmoved.

"I'm a western girl," Lahoma said at last, "and ever since Brick Willock gave me a home when I had none, I've lived right over yonder at the foot of the mountains. I was there when the cattlemen came, before the Indians had given up this country; and I was here when the first settlers moved in, and when the soldiers drove them out. I was living in the cove with Brick Willock when people came up from Texas and planted miles and miles of wheat; and I used to play with the rusty plows and machinery they left scattered about — after the three years' drought had starved them back to their homes. Then Old Man Walker came to Red River, sent his cowboys to drive us out of the cove, and your sheriff led the bunch. And it was Brick and myself that stood them off with our guns, our backs to the wall and our powder dry, and we never saw Mizzoo in *our* cove again. So you see, I ought

to be able to talk to western men in a way they can appreciate, and if there's anybody here that's not a western man — he couldn't understand our style, anyhow — he'd better go where he's needed, for out West you need only western men — like Brick Willock, for instance."

At reference to the well-known incident of Mizzoo's attempt to drive Willock from the cove, there was a sudden wave of laughter, none the less hearty because Mizzoo's face had flushed and his mouth had opened sheepishly. But at the recurrence of Willock's name, the crowd grew serious. They felt the justice of her claim that out West only western men were needed; they excused her for thinking Brick a model type; but let any one else hold him up before them as a model! . . .

Lahoma's manner changed; it grew deeper and more forceful:

"Men, I want to talk to you about this case — will you be the jury? Consider what kind of man swore out that warrant against Brick — the leader of a band of highwaymen! And who's his chief witness? You don't know Mr. Gledware. I do. You've heard he's a rich and influential citizen in the East. That's true. But I'm going to tell you something to show what he *is* — and what Brick

Willock is; just one thing; that's all I'll say about the character of either. As to Red Kimball, you don't have to be told. I'm not going to talk about the general features of the case — as to whether Brick was ever a highwayman or not; as to whether he killed Red's brother to save me and my stepfather, or did it in cold blood; as to whether he held up the stage or not. These things you've discussed; you've formed opinions about them. I want to tell you something you haven't heard. Will you listen?"

At first no one spoke. Then from the crowd came a measured impartial voice: "We got lots of time."

She was not discouraged by the intimation in the tone that all her speaking was in vain. Several in the crowd looked reproachfully at him who had responded, feeling that Lahoma deserved more consideration; but in the main, the men nodded grim approval. They had plenty of time — but at the end of it, Bill would either tell all he knew, or . . .

Lahoma plunged into the midst of her narrative:

"One evening Brick came on a deserted mover's wagon; he'd traveled all day with nothing to eat or drink, and he got into the wagon to escape the blistering sun. In there, he found a dead woman,

stretched on her pallet. He had a great curiosity to see her face, so he began lifting the cloth that covered her. He saw a pearl and onyx pin at her throat. It looked like one his mother used to wear. So he dropped the cloth and never looked at her face. She had died the evening before, and he knew she wouldn't have wanted any one to see her *then*. And he dug a grave in the sand, though she was nothing to him, and buried her — never seeing her face — and covered the spot with a great pyramid of stones, and prayed for her little girl —I was her little girl — the Indians had carried me away. You'll say that was a little thing; that anybody would have buried the poor helpless body. Maybe so. But about not looking at her face — well, I don't know; it *was* a little thing, of course, but somehow it just seems to show that Brick Willock wasn't little — had something great in his soul, you know. Seems to show that he couldn't have been a common murderer. It's something you'll have to feel for yourselves, nobody could explain it so you'd see, if you don't understand already."

The men stared at her, somewhat bewildered, saying nothing. In some breasts, a sense of something delicate, not to be defined, was stirred.

"One day," Lahoma resumed, "Brick saw a

white man with some Indians standing near that grave. He couldn't imagine what they meant to do, so he hid, thinking them after him. Years afterward Red Feather explained why they came that evening to the pile of stones. The white man was Mr. Gledware. After Red Kimball's gang captured the wagon-train, Mr. Gledware escaped, married Red Feather's daughter and lived with the Indians; he'd married immediately, to save his life, and the tribe suspected he meant to leave Indian Territory at the first chance. Mr. Gledware, great coward, was terrified night and day lest the suspicions of the Indians might finally cost him his life.

"It wasn't ten days after the massacre of the emigrants till he decided to give a proof of good faith. Too great a coward to try to get away and caring too much for his wife's rich lands to want to leave, he told about the pearl and onyx pin — he said he wanted to give it to Red Flower. A pretty good Indian, Red Feather was — true friend of mine; *he* wouldn't rob graves! But he said he'd take Mr. Gledware to the place, and if he got that pin, they'd all know he meant to live amongst them forever. *That's* why the band was standing there when Brick Willock looked from the mountain-top. Mr. Gledware dug up the body, after the Indians had rolled

away the stones — the body of his wife — my mother! — the body whose face Brick Willock wouldn't look at, in its helplessness of death. Mr. Gledware is the principal witness against Brick. If you don't feel what kind of man he is from what I've said, nobody could explain it to you."

From several of the intent listeners burst involuntary denunciations of Gledware, while on the faces of others showed a momentary gleam of horror.

Red Kimball's confederate spoke loudly, harshly: "But who killed Red Kimball and his pard and the stage-driver, if it wasn't Brick Willock?"

"I think it was Red Feather's band. I'm witness to the fact that Kimball agreed to bring Mr. Gledware the pearl and onyx pin on condition that Mr. Gledware appear against Brick. After Mr. Gledware deserted Red Flower, or rather after her death, Red Feather carried that pin about him; Mr. Gledware knew he'd never give it up alive. He was always afraid the Indian would find him — and at last he did find him. But Red Kimball got the pin — could that mean anything except that Kimball discovered the Indian's hiding-place and killed him? But for that, I'd think it Red Feather who attacked the stage and killed Red Kimball. As it is, I believe it must have been his friends."

"Now you've said something!" cried Mizzoo. "Boys, don't you think it's a reasonable explanation?"

Some of them did, evidently, for the grim resolution on their faces softened; others, however, were unconvinced.

A stern voice was raised: "Let Brick Willock come do his own explaining. Bill Atkins knows where he's hiding out — and *we* got to know. We've started in to be a law-abiding county, and that there warrant against Willock has got the right of way."

"You've no warrant against Bill," cried Wilfred, stepping to the edge of the platform, "therefore you've violated the law in locking him up."

"That's so," exclaimed Red Kimball's former comrade. "Well, turn 'im loose, that's what we ask — *let* him go — open the jail door!"

"He's locked up for his own safety," shouted Mizzoo. "You fellows agree to leave him alone, and I'll turn him out quick enough. You talk about the law — what you want to do to Bill ain't overly lawful, I take it."

"If he gives up his secret we ain't going to handle him rough," was the quick retort.

Lahoma found that the softening influence she

had exerted was already fast dissipating. They bore with her merely because of her youth and sex. She cried out desperately.

"Is there nothing I can say to move your hearts? Has my story of that pearl and onyx pin been lost on you? Couldn't you understand, after all? Are you western men, and yet unable to feel the worth of a western man like Brick? . . . How he clothed me and sheltered me when the man who should have supported the child left in his care neglected her . . . How he taught me and was always tender and gentle — never a cross word — a man like *that* . . . And you think he could kill! I don't know whether Bill was told his hiding-place or not. But if *I* knew it, do you think I'd tell? And if Bill betrayed him,— but Bill wouldn't do it. Thank God, I've been raised with real *men,* men that know how to stand by each other and be true to the death. You want Bill to turn traitor. I say, what kind of men are *you?*"

She turned to Wilfred, blinded by hot tears. "Oh, say something to them!" she gasped, clinging to his arm.

"Go on," murmured Wilfred. "I couldn't reach 'em, and you made a point, that time. Go on — don't give 'em a chance to think."

"But I can't — I've said all I had to say —"

"Don't stop, dear, for God's sake — the case is desperate! You'll have to do it — for Bill."

"And that isn't all," Lahoma called in a broken pathetic voice, as she turned her pale face upon the curious crowd. "That isn't all. You know Brick and Bill have been all I had — all in this world . . . You know they couldn't have been sweeter to me if they'd been the nearest of kin — they were more like women than men, somehow, when they spoke to me and sat with me in the dugout — and I guess I know a little about a mother's love because I've always had Brick and Bill. But one day somebody else came to the cove and — and this somebody else, well — he — this somebody else wants to marry me — to-day. This was the end of our journey," she went on blindly, "and — and it is our wedding-day. I thought there must be *some* way to get Brick to the wedding, but you see how it is. And — and we'll have to marry without him. But Bill's here — in that jail — because he wouldn't betray his friend. And I couldn't marry without either Brick or Bill, could I?"

She took her quivering hand from Wilfred's sturdy arm, and moving to the top of the steps, held out her trembling arms appealingly:

"*Men!* — Give me Bill!"

The crowd was with her, now. No doubt of that. All fierceness gone, tears here and there, broad grins to hide deep emotion, open admiration, touched with tenderness, in the eyes that took in her shy flower-like beauty.

"You shall have Bill!" shouted the spokesman of the crowd. And other voices cried, "Give her Bill! Give her Bill!"

"Bring him out!" continued the spokesman in stentorian tones. "We'll not ask him a question. Fellows, clear a path for 'em."

A broad lane was formed through the throng of smiling men whom the sudden, unexpected light of love had softened magically.

While Mizzoo hastened to Bill's cell, some one exclaimed, "Invite us, too. Make it a town wedding!"

And another started the shout, "Hurrah for Lahoma!"

Lahoma, who had taken refuge behind Wilfred's protection, wept and laughed in a rosy glow of triumphant joy.

Mizzoo presently reappeared, leaving the door wide open. He walked to the stairs, the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes deep-cut with appreciation

of the situation. "Fellows," he called, "he says you carried him in there, and dinged if you won't have to carry him out, for not a step will he take!"

At this unexpected development, a burst of laughter swelled into a roar. After that mighty merriment, Bill was as safe as a babe. Twenty volunteers pressed forward to carry the wedding-guest from his cell. And when the old man slowly but proudly followed Wilfred and Lahoma to the hotel where certain preparations were to be made — particularly as touching Bill's personal appearance — the town of Mangum began gathering at the newly-erected church whither they had been invited.

When the four friends — for Mizzoo joined them — drove up to the church door in the only carriage available, Bill descended stiffly, his eyes gleaming fiercely from under snowy locks, as if daring any one to ask him a question about Brick. But nobody did.

CHAPTER XXIV

MINE ENEMY

THE general suspicion that Bill Atkins knew more about Brick Willock than he had revealed, was not without foundation; though the extent of his knowledge was more limited than the town supposed. Bill had carried to his friend — hidden in the crevice in the mountain-top — the news of Red Kimball's death; since then, they had not seen each other.

Skulking along wooded gullies by day, creeping down into the cove at night, Willock had unconsciously reverted to the habits of thought and action belonging to the time of his outlawry. He was again, in spirit, a highwayman, though his hostility was directed only against those seeking to bring him to justice. The softening influence of the years spent with Lahoma was no longer apparent in his shifting bloodshot eyes, his crouching shoulders, his furtive hand ever ready to snatch the weapon from concealment. This sinister aspect of wildness, intensified by straggling whiskers and uncombed

locks, gave to his giant form a kinship to the huge grotesquely shaped rocks among which he had made his den.

He heard of Red Kimball's death with bitter disappointment. He had hoped to encounter his former chief, to grapple with him, to hurl him, perhaps, from the precipice overlooking Bill's former home. If in his fall, Kimball, with arms wound about his waist, had dragged him down to the same death, what matter? Though his enemy was now no more, the sheriff held the warrant for his arrest — as if the dead man could still strike a mortal blow. The sheriff might be overcome — he was but a man. That piece of paper calling for his arrest — an arrest that would mean, at best, years in the penitentiary — had behind it the whole state of Texas.

To Willock's feverish imagination, the warrant became personified; a mysterious force, not to be destroyed by material means; it was not only paper, but spirit. And it had come between him and Lahoma, it had shut him off from the possibility of a peaceful old age. The cove was no longer home but a hiding-place.

He did not question the justice of this sequel to his earlier life. No doubt deeds of long ago, never

punished, demanded a sacrifice. He hated the agents of this justice not so much because they threatened his liberty, his life, as because they stepped in between himself and Lahoma. Always a man of expedients, he now sought some way of frustrating justice, and naturally his plans took the color of violence. Denied the savage joy of killing Red Kimball — and he would have killed him with as little compunction as if he had been a wolf — his thoughts turned toward Gledware.

Gledware was the only witness of the deed for which the warrant demanded his arrest. Willock wished many of his other deeds had been prompted by impulses as generous as those which had led to Kansas Kimball's death. Perhaps it was the irony of justice that he should be threatened by the one act of bloodshed which had saved Lahoma's life. If he must be hanged or imprisoned because he had not, like the rest of the band, given himself up for official pardon, it was as well to suffer from one deed as from another. But it would be better still, as in the past, to escape all consequences. Without Gledware, they could prove nothing.

Would Gledware testify, now that Red Kimball, who had bought his testimony with the death of the Indian, no longer lived to exact payment? Willock

felt sure he would. In the first place, Gledware had placed himself on record as a witness, hence could hardly retreat; in the second place, he would doubtless be anxious to rid himself of the danger of ever meeting Willock, whom his conscience must have caused him to hate with the hatred of the man who wrongs his benefactor.

Willock transferred all his rage against the dead enemy to the living. He reminded himself how Gledware had caused the death of Red Feather, not in the heat of fury or in blind terror, but in cold-blooded bargaining. He meditated on Gledware's attitude toward Lahoma; he thought nothing good of him, he magnified the evil. That scene at the grave of his wife — and Red Feather's account of how he had dug up the body for a mere pin of pearl and onyx . . . Ought such a creature to live to condemn him, to bring sorrow on the stepdaughter he had basely refused to acknowledge?

To wait for the coming of the witness would be to lose an opportunity that might never recur. Willock would go to him. In doing so, he would not only take Gledware by surprise, but would leave the only neighborhood in which search would be made for himself. Thus it came about that while the environs of the cove were being minutely examined,

Brick, riding his fastest pony, was on the way to Kansas City.

He reached Kansas City without unusual incident, where he was accepted naturally, as a product of the West. Had his appearance been twice as uncouth, twice as wild, it would have accorded all the better with western superstitions that prevailed in this city, fast forgetting that it had been a western outpost. At the hotel, whose situation he knew from Lahoma's letters, he learned that Gledware was neither there, nor at his home in the country. The country-house was closed up and, in fact, there was a rumor that it was sold, or was about to be sold. One of the porters happened to know that Gledware had gone for a week's diversion down in the Ozarks. There were a lake, a club-house, a dancing-hall, as yet unopened. The season was too early for the usual crowd at Ozark Lodge, but the warm wave that nearly always came at this time of year, had prompted a sudden outing party which might last no longer than the warm wave.

Willock took the first train south and rode with the car window up — the outside breath was the breath of balmy summer though the trees stood bleak and leafless against the sky. Two days ago, snow had fallen — but the birds did not remember

it. Seven hours brought him to a lonely wagon-trail called Ozark Lodge because after winding among hills several miles it at last reached the club-house of that name overlooking the lake. He left the train in the dusk of evening, and walked briskly away, the only moving figure in the wilderness.

His pace did not slacken till a gleam as of fallen sky cupped in night-fringe warned him that the club-house must be near. A turn of a hill brought it into view, the windows not yet aglow. Nearer at hand was the boat-house, seemingly deserted. But as Willock, now grown wary, crept forward among the post-oaks and blackjacks, well screened from observation by chinkapin masses of gray interlocked network, he discovered two figures near the platform edging the lake. Neither was the one he sought; but from their being there — they were Edgerton Compton and Annabel,— he knew Gledware could not be far away.

"No," Annabel was saying decisively, and yet with an accent of regret, "No, Edgerton, I can't."

"But our last boat-ride," he urged. "Don't refuse me the last ride — a ride to think about all my life. I'm going away to-morrow at noon, as I promised. But early in the morning —"

"I have promised *him*," she said with lingering

sadness in her voice. "So I must go with him. He has already engaged the boatman. He'll be here at seven, waiting for me. So you see —"

"Annabel, I shall be here at seven, also!" he exclaimed impetuously.

"But why? I must go with him, Edgerton. You see that."

"Then I shall row alone."

"Why would you add to my unhappiness?" she pleaded.

"I shall be here at seven," he returned grimly; "while you and he take your morning boat-ride, I shall row alone."

She turned from him with a sigh, and he followed her dejectedly up the path toward the club-house.

She had lost some of the fresh beauty which she had brought to the cove, and her step was no longer elastic; but this Willock did not notice. He gave little heed to their tones, their gestures, their looks in which love sought a thin disguise wherein it might show itself unnamed. He had seized on the vital fact that in the morning, Annabel and Gledware would push off from the boat-house steps, presumably alone; and it would be early morning. Perhaps Gledware would come first to the boat-house, there to wait for Annabel. In that case, he

would not ride with Annabel. The lake was deep — deep as Willock's hate.

Willock passed the night in the woods, sometimes walking against time among the hills, sometimes seated on the ground, brooding. The night was without breath, without coolness. Occasionally he climbed a rounded elevation from which the club-house was discernible. No lights twinkled among the barren trees. All in that wilderness seemed asleep save himself. The myriad insects that sing through the spring and summer months had not yet found their voices; there was no trill of frogs, not even the hooting of an owl,— no sound but his own breathing.

At break of dawn he crept into the boat-house like a shadow, barefooted, bareheaded — the club-house was not yet awake. He looked about the barnlike room for a hiding-place. Walls, floor, ceiling were bare. Near the door opening on the lake was a rustic bench, impossible as a refuge. Only in one corner, where empty boxes and a disused skiff formed a barricade, could he hope for concealment. He glided thither, and on the floor between the dusty wall of broad boards and the jumbled partition, he found a man stretched on his back.

At first, he thought he had surprised a sleeper,

but as the figure did not move, he decided it must be a corpse. He would have fled but for his need of this corner. He bent down — the man was bound hand and foot. In the mouth, a gag was fastened. Neck and ankles were tied to spikes in the wall.

Willock swiftly surveyed the lake and the sloping hill leading down from the club-house. Nobody was near. As he stared at the landscape, the front door of the club-house opened. He darted back to the corner. "Pardner," he said, "I got to ask your hospitality for a spell, and if you move so as to attract attention, I got to fix you better. I didn't do this here, pardner, but you shore look like some of my handiwork in days past and gone. I'll share this corner with you for a while, and if you don't give me away to them that's coming, I promise to set you free. That's fair, I guess. 'A man ain't all bad,' says Brick, 'as unties the knots that other men has tied,' says he. Just lay still and comfortable, and we'll see what's coming."

Presently there were footsteps in the path, and to Willock's intense disappointment, Gledware and Annabel came in together. They were in the midst of a conversation and at the first few words, he found it related to Lahoma. The boatman who had prom-

ised to bring the skiff for them at seven — it developed that Gledware had no intention of doing the rowing — had not yet come. They sat down on the rustic bench, their voices distinctly audible in all parts of the small building.

"Her closest living relative," Gledware said, "is a great-aunt, living in Boston. As soon as I found out who she was — I'd always supposed her living among Indians, and that it would be impossible to find her — but as soon as I learned the truth, without saying anything to *her*, I wrote to her great-aunt. I've never been in a position to take care of Lahoma — I felt that I ought to place her with her own family. I got an answer — about what you would expect. They'd give her a home — I told them what a respectable girl she is — fairly creditable appearance — intelligent enough . . . But they couldn't stand those people she lives with — criminals, you know, Annabel, highwaymen — murderers! Imagine Brick Willock in a Boston drawing-room . . . But you couldn't."

"No," Annabel agreed. "Poor Lahoma! And I know she'd never give him up."

"That's it — she's immovable. She'd insist on taking him along. But he belongs to another age — a different country. He couldn't understand.

He thinks when you've anything against a man, the proper move is to kill 'im. He's just like an Indian — a wild beast. Wouldn't know what we meant if we talked about civilization. His religion is the knife. Well — you see; if he were out of the way, Lahoma would have her chance."

"But couldn't he be arrested?"

"That's my only hope. If he were hanged, or locked up for a certain number of years, Lahoma'd go East. But as long as he's at large, she'll wait for him to turn up. She'll stay right there in the cove till she dies of old age, if he's free to visit her at odd moments. It's her idea of fidelity, and it's true that he did take her in when she needed somebody. There's a move on foot now, to arrest him for an old crime — a murder. I witnessed the deed — I'll testify, if called on. Lahoma will hate me for that — but it'll be the greatest favor I could possibly do her. She knows I mean to appear against him, and she thinks me a brute. But if I can convict Willock, it'll place Lahoma in a family of wealth and refinement —"

He broke off with, "Wonder why that old deaf boatman doesn't come?" He walked impatiently to the head of the steps and stared out over the lake.

"Somebody out there now," he exclaimed. "Oh, — it's Edgerton, rowing about!"

He returned to the bench, but did not sit down. "Annabel," he said abruptly, "you promised me to name the day, this morning."

"Yes," she responded very faintly.

"And I am sure, dear," he added in a deep resonant voice, "that in time you will come to care for me as I care for you now — you, the only woman I have ever loved. I understand about Edgerton, but you see, you couldn't marry him — in fact, he couldn't marry anybody for years; he has nothing . . . And these earlier attachments that we think the biggest things in our lives — well, they just dwindle, Annabel, they dwindle as we get the true perspective. I know your happiness depends upon me, and it rejoices me to know it. I can give you all you want — all you can dream of — and I'm man-of-the-world enough to understand that happiness depends just on that — getting what you want."

Annabel started up abruptly. "I think I heard the boat scraping outside."

"Yes, he's there. Come, dear, and before the ride is ended you must name the day —"

"*Don't!*" she exclaimed sharply. "He —"

"He's as deaf as a post, my dear," Gledware murmured gently. "That's why I selected him. I knew we'd want to talk — I knew you'd name the day."

He helped her down the rattling boards.

Brick Willock rose softly and stole toward the opening, his eyes filled with a strange light. They no longer glared with the blood-lust of a wild beast, but showed gloomy and perplexed; the words spoken concerning himself had sunk deep.

The boatman sat with his back to Gledware and Annabel. He wore a long dingy coat of light gray and a huge battered straw hat, whose wide brim hid his hair and almost eclipsed his face. Willock, careful not to show himself, stared at the skiff as it shot out from the landing, his brow wrinkled in anxious thought. He felt strange and dizzy, and at first fancied it was because of the resolution that had taken possession of him — the resolution to return to Greer County and give himself up. This purpose, as unreasoning as his plan to kill Gledware, grew as fixed in his mind as half an hour before his other plan had been.

To go voluntarily to the sheriff, unresistingly to hold out his wrists for the handcuffs — that would

indeed mark a new era in his life. "A wild Indian wouldn't do that," he mused, "nor a wild beast. I guess I understand, after all. And if that's the way to make Lahoma happy . . ."

No wonder he felt queer; but his light-headedness did not rise, as a matter of fact, entirely from subjective storm-threatenings. There was something about that boatman — now, when he tilted up his head slightly, and the hat failed to conceal — was it possible? . .

"My God!" whispered Willock; "it's Red Feather!"

And Gledware, with eyes only for Annabel, finding nothing beyond her but a long gray coat, a big straw hat and two rowing arms — did not suspect the truth!

In a flash, Willock comprehended all. The Indian had dropped the pin in Kimball's path, and Kimball, finding it, had carried it to Gledware as if Red Feather were dead. The Indian had led his braves against the stage-coach — Kimball had fallen under his knife. Yonder man in the corner, bound and gagged, was doubtless the old deaf boatman engaged by Gledware. Red Feather had taken his place that he might row Gledware far out on the lake . . .

But Annabel was in the boat. If the Indian . . .

Far away toward the east, Edgerton Compton was rowing, not near enough to intervene in case the Indian attempted violence, but better able than himself to lend assistance if the boat were overturned. Willock could, in truth, do nothing, except shout a warning, and this he forebore lest it hasten the impending catastrophe. He remained, therefore, half-hidden, crouching at the doorway, his eyes glued to the rapidly gliding boat, with its three figures clear-cut against the first faint sun-glow.

CHAPTER XXV

GLEDWARE'S POSSESSIONS

RED FEATHER'S mind was not constituted to entertain more than one leading thought at a time. Ever since the desertion and death of his daughter, revenge had been his dominant passion. It was in order to find Gledware that he had haunted the trail during the years of Lahoma's youth, always hoping to discover him in the new country — gliding behind herds of cattle, listening to scraps of talks among the cattlemen, earning from Mizzoo the uneasy designation, "the ghost."

Thanks to the reading aloud of Lahoma's letter, he had learned of Gledware's presence in the city which he had known years before as Westport Landing. He went thither unbewildered by its marvelous changes, undistracted by its tumultuous flood of life — for his mind was full of his mission; he could see only the blood following the blade of his knife, heard nothing but a groan, a death-rattle.

Gledware's presence in the boat this morning had been made possible only by the interposition of

Lahoma; but for the Indian's deep-seated affection for her whom he regarded as a child, the man now smiling into Annabel's pale face would long ago have found his final resting-place. It was due to the Indian's singleness of thought that Lahoma's plan had struck him as good. Gledware, stripped of all his possessions, slinking as a beggar from door to door, no roof, no bed, but sky and earth — that is what Red Feather had meant.

He had believed Gledware glad of the respite. That he should accept the alternative seemed reasonable. There was a choice only between death and poverty — and Gledware wished to live so desperately — so basely! The chief cared little for life; still, he would unhesitatingly have preferred the most meager existence to a knife in his heart; how much more, then, this craven white man. But the plan had failed because Gledware did not believe death was the other alternative. Never in the remotest way had it occurred to the avenger that Gledware could be spared should he prove false to his oath. Red Feather was less a man with passions than a cold relentless fate. This fate would surely overcome the helpless wretch, should he cling to his riches.

As Red Feather skimmed the water with long

sweeps of his oars, never looking back, the voices of his passengers came to his ears without meaning. He was thinking of the last few days and how this morning's ride was their fitting sequel. The early sunbeams were full on him as he tilted back his head, but they showed no emotion on his face, hard-set and dully red in the clear radiance.

Crouching near the summer-house at Gledware's place, he had overheard Red Kimball boast to bring Gledware the pearl and onyx pin. Then had shot through his darkened mind the suspicion that Gledware meant to escape the one condition on which his life was to be spared. With simple cunning he had left the pin where the outlaw must find it; his own death would be taken for granted — what then?

What then? This ride in the boat. Gledware had made his choice; he had clung to his possessions — and now Death held the oars. He was scarcely past middle age. He might have lived so long, he who so loved to live! But no, he had chosen to be rich — and to die.

When Red Feather brought his mind back to the present, Gledware was describing to Annabel a ranch in California for which he had traded the house near Independence. He would take her far

away; he would build a house thus and thus — rooms so; terraces here; marble pillars . . .

Annabel listened gravely, silently, her face all the paler for the sunlight flashing over it, for the mimic sun on the waves glancing up into her pensive eyes. Somehow, the sunshine, the ripple of the water, seemed to form no part of her life, belonged rather, to Edgerton Compton rowing in solitude against the sky. Those naked trees, bare brown hills and ledges of huge stones seemed her world-boundaries, kin to her, claiming her — But there was California . . . and the splendid house to be built . . .

The Indian was listening now, but as he heard projected details glowingly presented, no change came in his grim deep-lined face. He simply knew it was not to be — let the fool plan! He found himself wondering dully why he no longer hated Gledware with that vindictive fury that gloats over the death-grip, lingers in fiendish leisure over the lifted scalp. He scarcely remembered the wrong done his daughter; it was almost as if he had banished the cause of his revenge; as if vengeance itself had become a simple stroke of destiny. Gledware had chosen his possession, and the Indian was Fate's answer.

"Beautiful one," he heard Gledware say, speak-

ing in an altered tone, "all that is in the future — but see what I have brought you; this is for to-day. It's yours, dear — let me see it around your neck with the sun full upon it —"

Red Feather turned his head, curiously.

Gledware held outstretched a magnificent diamond necklace which shot forth dazzling rays as it swung from his eager fingers.

Annabel uttered a smothered cry of delight as the iridescence filled her eyes. She looked across the water toward the pagoda-shaped club-house where her mother stood, faintly defined as a speck of white against the green wall-shingles of the piazza. It seemed that it needed this glance to steady her nerves. Edgerton was forgotten. She reached out her hand. And then, perplexed at the necklace being suddenly withdraw, she looked up. She caught a glimpse of Gledware's face, and her blood turned cold.

That face was frozen in horror. At the turning of the boatman's head, he had instantly recognized under the huge-brimmed hat, the face of his enemy as if brought back from the grave.

There was a moment's tense silence, filled with mystery for her, with indescribable agony for him, with simple waiting for the Indian. Annabel turned

to discover the cause of Gledware's terror, but she saw no malice, no threat, in the boatman's eyes.

Gledware ceased breathing, then his form quivered with a sudden inrush of breath as of a man emerging from diving. His eyes rolled in his head as he turned about scanning the shore, glaring at Edgerton's distant boat. Why had he come unarmed? How could he have put faith in Red Kimball's assurances? He tortured his brain for some gleam of hope.

"This is all I have," he shrieked, as if the Indian's foot was already upon his neck. "This is all I have." He flung the necklace into the water. "It was a lie about the California ranch — it's a lie about all my property — I've got nothing, Annabel! I sold the last bit to get you the necklace, but I shouldn't have done that. Now it's gone. I have nothing!"

The Indian rose slowly. The oars slipped down and floated away in the flashing stream of the sun's rays.

Annabel, realizing that the Indian, despite his impassive countenance, threatened some horrible catastrophe, started up with a scream. Edgerton had already turned toward them; alarmed at sound of

Gledware's terror. He bent to the oars, comprehending only that Annabel was in danger.

"Edgerton!" she shrieked blindly. "Edgerton! Edgerton! Edgerton!"

Gledware crouched at her feet, crying beseechingly, "I swear I have nothing — nothing! I sold everything — gave it away — left it — nothing in all the world! I'm willing to beg, to starve — I don't want to own anything — I only want to live — to live . . . My God! *to live* . . ."

Red Feather did not utter a word. But with the stealthy lightness and litheness of a panther, he stepped over the seat and moved toward Gledware.

Then Gledware, pushed to the last extremity, despairing of the interposition of some miraculous chance, was forced back upon himself. With the vision of an inherent coward he saw all chances against him; but with the desperation of a maddened soul, he threw himself upon the defensive.

Red Feather had not expected to see him offer resistance. This show of clenched teeth and doubled fists suddenly enraged him, and the old lust of vengeance flamed from his eyes. Hat and disguising coat were cast aside. For a moment his form, rigid and erect, gleamed like a statue of copper cut in stern relentless lines, and the single crimson feather

in his raven locks matched, in gold, the silver brightness of his upraised blade.

The next moment his form shot forward, his arm gripped Gledware about the neck, despite furious resistence, and both men fell into the water.

The violent shock given to the boat sent Annabel to her knees. Clutching the side she gazed with horrified eyes at the water in her wake. The men had disappeared, but in the glowing white path cut across the lake by the sun, appeared a dull red streak that thinned away to faint purple and dim pink. She watched the sinister discoloration with fascinated eyes. What was taking place beneath the smooth tide? Or was it all over? Had Red Feather found a rock to which he could cling while he drowned himself with his victim? Or had their bodies been caught in the tangled branches of a submerged forest tree? It was one of the mysteries of the Ozarks never to be solved.

She was still kneeling, still staring with frightened eyes, still wondering, when Edgerton Compton rowed up beside her.

"He said he had nothing," she stammered, as he helped her to rise. "He said he had nothing . . . How true it is!" Edgerton gently lifted her to his skiff, then stepped in beside her. He, too, was

His form shot forward

watching the water for the possible emergence of a ghastly face.

Annabel began trembling as with the ague. "Edgerton! . . . He said it was all a lie — about his property — and so it was. Everything is a lie except — this . . ."

She clung to him.

CHAPTER XXVI

JUST A HABIT

WHEN Bill Atkins with an air of impenetrable mystery invited Wilfred Compton to a ride that might keep him from his bride several days, the young man guessed that Willock had been found. Lahoma, divining as much, urged Wilfred to hasten, assured him that she enjoyed the publicity and stirring life of the Mangum hotel and expressed confidence that should she need a friend, Mizzoo would help her through any difficulty. So Wilfred rode away with Bill, and Willock was not mentioned.

Bill was evidently in deep trouble, and when Wilfred and he had let themselves down into the stone corridor whose only entrance was a crevice in the mountain-top, he understood the old trapper's deep despondency — Brick Willock was there; and Brick declared his intention of giving himself up. He announced his purpose before greetings had subsided. Bill called him an old fool, used unpruned language, scolded, rather than argued. Wilfred, on the other

hand, delayed events by requesting full particulars of the last few weeks.

"He's told me all he's been up to," Bill objected; "there's no call to travel over that ground again. What I brought you here for, Wilfred, is to show him how foolish he'd be to let himself be taken when he's free as the wind."

"I tells my tale," declared Brick, "and them as has heard it once can take it or leave it." He was discursive, circumstantial, and it was a long time before he led them in fancy to the door of the boat-house and showed them Red Feather and Gledware disappearing forever beneath the surface of the lake.

"There I waited," he said, "expecting first one head, then the other to come to light, but nothing happened. Seemed like I couldn't move. But Edgerton, he began rowing towards me with Annabel, she happy despite herself, and when I see it wouldn't do to tarry no longer, I cuts loose the old deaf boatman and unstops his mouth. Well, sir, he lets out a yell that would a-done credit to a bobcat fighting in the traps. I had to run for it — fellows from the club-house took after me thinking I'd been murdering somebody — I skinned them Ozark hills and I skinned myself. But Brick, he says, 'When you turns loose a bobcat, expect scratches,' says he."

"Don't tell about how you hid in the hills waiting for a night train," Bill pleaded.

"I tells it all;" Brick was inflexible. "You are here, I'm here, and it's a safe place. We may never be so put again."

"A safe place!" Bill snarled. "Yes, it *is* a safe place. But you've lost your nerve. *Was* a time, when you'd have stood out creation in a hole like this. But you've turned to salt, you have a regular Bible character — giving up to the law, letting them clap you in jail, getting yourself hanged, very likely! And all because you've lost your nerve. See here, Brick, stand 'em out! I'll steady you through thick and thin. I'll bring you grub and water."

"*You* couldn't do nothing," Brick returned contemptuously, "you're too old. As for that, I ain't come to the pass of needing being waited on, I guess. It ain't dangers that subdues me, it's principles. Look here!"

He walked to the cross-bar that was set in the walls to guard the floor from the unknown abyss. "I found out they was a hole in the rock just about five feet under the floor. I can take this rope and tie one end to the post and let myself down to that little room where there's grub enough to last a long

siege, where there's bedding and common luxuries, as tobacco and the like. I ain't been smoked out, into the open, I goes free and disposed and my hands held up according."

When he had finished the last morsel of his story and had warmed some of it over for another taste, there came an ominous silence, broken at last by the querulous voice of Bill, arguing against surrender.

Willock waited in patience till his friend had exhausted himself. "I ain't saying nothing," he explained to Wilfred, "because he ain't pervious to reason, and it does him good to get that out of his system."

"Let me make a suggestion," exclaimed Wilfred suddenly.

Willock looked at him suspiciously. "If it ain't counter to my plans —"

"It isn't. It's this: Suppose we drop the subject till to-morrow — it won't hurt any of us to sleep on it, and I know *I'd* enjoy another night with you, as in the old days."

"I'm willing to sleep on it, out of friendship," Willock conceded unwillingly, "though I'd rest easier on a bed in the jail. There never was no bird more crazy to get into a cage than I am to be shut up. But as to the old days, they ain't none left.

Them deputies is in the dugout, they're in the cabin I built for Lahoma, they think they owns our cove. Well, they's no place left for me; life wouldn't be nothing, crouching and slinking up here in the rocks. Life wouldn't be nothing to me without Lahoma. I'd have a pretty chance for happiness, now wouldn't I, sitting up somewheres with Bill Atkins! I ain't saying I mightn't get out of this country and find a safe spot where I could live free and disposed with an old renegade like *him* that nobody ain't after and ain't a-caring whether he's above ground or in kingdom come. But I couldn't be with Lahoma; I'm under ban."

"If you were on my farm near Oklahoma City," Wilfred suggested, "and Lahoma and I lived in the city, you could often see her. Up there, nobody'd molest you, nobody'd know you. That's what I've been planning. You could look after the farm and Bill could go back and forth. As soon as the news comes that Red Feather killed Gledware, it'll be taken for granted that he killed Red Kimball and attacked the stage. You'll be cleared of all that and nobody will want you arrested."

Willock rose. "Are we going to sleep on this, or shall I answer you now?" he demanded fixedly.

Wilfred hastily asked for time.

They passed the night in the mountain-top, but Willock had spoken truly; there were no old days. The one subject forbidden was the only subject in their minds. All attempts at reminiscence, at irrelevant anecdotes, were mere pretense. The fact that Wilfred and Lahoma were now married seemed to banish events of a month ago as if they were years and years in the past.

They partook of breakfast in the gray dawn of the new day, eating by lantern-light. And when the light had been extinguished, Willock, like a wild animal brought to bay, squared his shoulders against the wall, and said: "We've slept on it. Say all you got to say. Don't leave out nothing because you might be sorry, afterwards. Speak together, or one at a time, it's all the same to me. And when you're done, and say you're done, I'll do my talking, according."

And when they were done, and said they were done, he straightened himself and said:

"When Red Kimball's band give themselves to the law that done nothing to them, there might of been a man, one of 'em, that never come in out of the rain. I ain't saying I am that man, for I stands by the records and the proofs and the showings of man and man, technical and arbitrary. But in due

time, the governor of Texas he says that that man — whoever he may be — was no longer to be excused on the grounds that he done his operating in No-Man's Land and his residing in the state of Texas. And he said that there man would be held responsible for all the deeds done by Red Kimball's band. That word has been handed down. Now whether I'm that man, or just thought to be that man, makes little difference. I'm a fugitive on the face of the earth without an ark of safety — referring to my cove. That's *me*.

"Now look at *Lahoma*. She has folks, not meaning you, Wilfred, but Boston kin that stands high. A woman ain't nothing without family, out in the world. You're going to be a great man some day, if I don't miss my guess, a great man in Oklahoma government and laws. Lahoma's going to be proud of you. You'll take a hand in politics, you'll be elected to something high. If I lived near at hand, I'd all-time be hiding, and having her a-conniving at something that would hurt your reputation if found out, and that would kill me because I couldn't breathe under such a load. And if away from her, well — I'm too old, now, to live without Lahoma. She's — she's just a habit of mine.

"So you puts me in jail. They does what they

likes with me, hangs me or gives me time, but the point as I see it is this: I'll be disposed of, I'll be given a rank, you may say, and classified. Lahoma won't be hampered. She's young; young people takes things hard but they don't take 'em long. In due time, them Boston kinfolks will be inviting her and will be visiting her, and you'll be in congress, like enough — if you wasn't a western man, I'd say you might be president. And everybody will honor you and feast you — and as to Brick Willock, he'll simply be forgot.

"Which is eminent and proper, Wilfred. I belongs to the past — *I'm* a kind of wild creature such as has to die out when civilization rolls high; and she's rolling high in these parts, and it's for me and Bill to join the Indians and buffaloes, and fade away. Trappers is out of date; so is highwaymen, I judge.

"I don't know as I makes myself clear or well put, but if you'll catch up the ponies I guess your sheriff can handle my meaning."

Without much difficulty, Wilfred effected another compromise. They waited till night before leaving the retreat. The reason accepted for this delay was that in the daytime the deputies would stop them and Willock wanted to give himself up

to the chief in command. When it was dark they slipped down the gully whose matted trees, though stripped of leaves, offered additional shelter. In the cove, they saw the light streaming from the window of the dugout — that famous window that had given Lahoma her first outlook upon learning. As the beams caught his eye, a sigh heaved the great bulk of the former master of the cove, but he said nothing.

In oppressive silence they skirted Turtle Hill and emerged from the horseshoe bend, finding in a sheltered nook the three ponies that Wilfred had provided at nightfall. He had hoped to the last that Willock could be prevailed on to alter his decision, and even while riding away toward Mangum, he argued and coaxed. But it was in vain, and as they clattered up to the hotel veranda, Willock was searching the crowd for a glimpse of the sheriff.

The street was unusually full for that time of night; some topic of engrossing interest seemed to engage all minds until Willock's figure was recognized; then, indeed, he held the center of attention. Men gathered eagerly, curiously, but without the hostility they would have displayed had not a message regarding Red Feather reached the town.

Brick was still an outlaw, to be sure, but whatever crimes he had committed were unknown, hence unable to react on the imagination. The surviving friend of Red Kimball, giving up his efforts against Willock on the liberation of Bill, had left the country, harmless without his leader.

Conversation which had been loud and excited, eager calls from street corners that had punctuated the many-tongued argument and exposition, dimmed to silence. There was a forward movement of the men, not a rush but a vibratory swell of the human tide, pushing toward the steps of the hotel. The two riderless horses danced sidewise — Brick Willock had jumped upon the unpainted floor of the veranda, and Wilfred had sprung lightly to his side.

"I'll just keep on my horse," muttered Bill, resting one leg stiffly over the pommel. "I can't get up as I used to, and I expect to stay with ye, Brick, to the jail door."

Willock did not turn his shaggy head to answer. He had seen the sheriff at the other end of the piazza, and he made straight for him, not even condescending to a grin when the other, mistaking his intentions, whipped out his revolver.

"Put it up, pard," Brick said gruffly. "When

you come to me in the cove, a few years ago, I give you a warm welcome, but now I ain't a-coming to you, I'm a-coming to the Law. Where's that there warrant?"

The crowd that had been listening to the sheriff's discourse before the arrival of the highwayman, scattered at sight of the drawn weapon — all except Lahoma.

"Brick!" she cried, "oh, Brick, Brick!"

There was something in her voice he could not understand, but he dared not turn to examine her face; he could not trust himself if he once looked at her.

"Get out your warrant," he cried savagely, "and get it out quick if you want *me*!" His great breast heaved with the conflict of powerful emotions.

"I'm sure sorry to see you, old man," Mizzoo declared. "We know Red Feather done what we was charging up against you. But I guess there's no other course open to me. As my aunt used to say (Miss Sue of Missouri) 'I got a duty — do it, I must.'" He thrust his hairy hand into his bosom and drew forth the fateful paper.

Lahoma laughed. "Read it, Mizzoo, read it aloud — read all of it!" she cried gleefully.

Wilfred looked at her, bewildered. The crowd

stared also, knowing her love for Brick, therefore dazed at the sound of mirthful music. Brick turned his head at last; he looked, also, not reproachfully but with a question in his hard stern eyes.

Mizzoo turned red. "Well, yes, I'll read it," he said, defiantly. "Sure! I guess as sheriff of Greer County I'll make shift to get through with it alive."

He began to read, slowly, doggedly; Brick, without movement save for that heaving of his bosom, facing him with a mingling on his face of supreme defiance for the reader and superstitious awe for the legal instrument.

"That's all," Mizzoo at last announced. "You'll have to come with me, Willock."

"Hold on!" came voices from the crowd. During the reading, they had been watching Lahoma, and her expression promised more than fruitless laughter. "Hold on, Mizzoo, Lahoma's got something up her sleeve!"

Lahoma spoke clearly, that her voice might carry to the confines of the crowd: "Mizzoo, I think you read in that warrant, 'county of Greer, state of Texas'? Didn't you?"

"That's what I done. Here's the words."

"But, you see," returned Lahoma, "that warrant's no good!"

Mizzoo stared at her a moment, then exclaimed violently, "By —" Propriety forbade the completion of his phrase.

The crowd instantly caught her meaning; a shout rose, shrill, tumultuous, broken with laughter. She had reminded them of the subject which a short time ago had engaged all minds.

"It's no good," cried Lahoma triumphantly. She took it from Mizzoo's lax fingers and deliberately tore it from top to bottom.

"I guess I'm a-getting old, sure enough," said Bill. "This is beyond me."

Wilfred looked at Lahoma questioningly. Brick, stupified by violence done that sacred instrument of civilization, stood rooted to the spot.

Mizzoo was grinning now. "You see," he explained, "word come to-day that the Supreme Court has at last turned in its decision. Prairie Dog Fork is now Red River, and 'Red River' is only the North Fork of Red River — and that means that Greer County don't belong to Texas, and never did belong to her, but is a part of Oklahoma."

"And you'll never have an Oklahoma writ served on you," cried Lahoma, "not while I'm living!

And you'll go with us to our farm and live with us, you and Bill and . . ."

Lahoma had expected to be very calm and logical, for she knew she had all the advantage on her side. But when she saw the change in Brick's eyes, she forgot her rights; she forgot all that watching crowd; she forgot even Wilfred — and with a spring she was in Brick's arms, sobbing for joy.

He tried to say something about her Boston kin, but he could not express the thought coherently, for giant as he was, he was sobbing, too.

"If there's ever a meeting," she said, between tears and laughter, "the East will have to come to the West!"

"Those Boston folks," cried Bill, with a sudden upheaval of unwonted humor, "can simply go to — beans! I'm a-getting down," he added, cautiously lowering himself from his pony; "I guess I'm in this, too."

"You're in it," growled Brick, "but you're on the outskirts. Don't come no nearer." He stroked the head that rested on his breast, his great hand moving with exceeding gentleness. He gazed over her brown glory, at the sympathetic crowd.

"Fellows," he cried, "just look what I've raised!"

"Boys," exclaimed Mizzoo, "what do you say? Let's give three cheers for Lahoma."

Wilfred's voice cut across the last word, proud and happy: "Make it Lahoma of Oklahoma!"

THE END